

TRAFFIC ZINE





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Organizers (+Cover Design)

Contributors

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Organizers



Conk

PinkConkonut   



Vio

vyeoh 
Vyeoh_  



Pho

phosphorus-noodles  



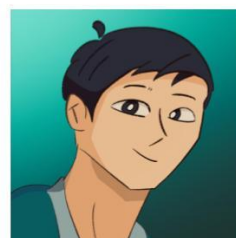
Bee

beexng  



Gin

ginngerine  



McDuck

McDuck08 
McDuck08_ 



Cover Design



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ukiyoioi   



Contributors

Session One



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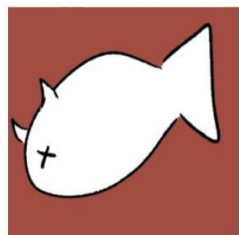
Roz (nicecrumb)

Nightcrumb 
Nicecrumbart 



Shep

shepscapades   



Chay

yuoutofwater 



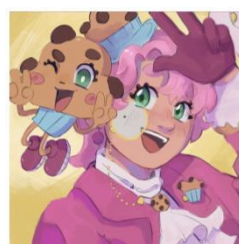
Tele

teletuple  



Fishface

MsFishFace 



Sophie

sophiemuffin 
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Aries

aries-of-spades 
Aries_the_man_in_the_Chicken
_Costume 



Contributors

Session Two



Sprout

sproutellini   



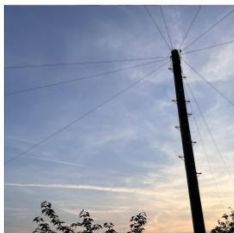
Jamie

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Jackiestinks_ 



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Bugga

Bugganox  



Pebble

PebbLeeTea   



Chlorine

Chlorinated_eel 
chlorinated_fish_pond 

Contributors

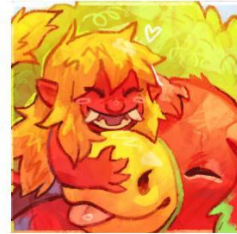
Session Three



Fever Fevekko
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thetomorrowshow  
TheYesterdayShow  



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Contributors

Session Four



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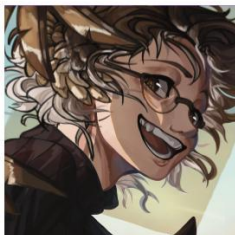
Noor Lakes

noorlakes_again 
Noor_or_ivy_and_avan 



Penk

pnakey 



Persii

persiiart   



Finny

i-am-creacheur 



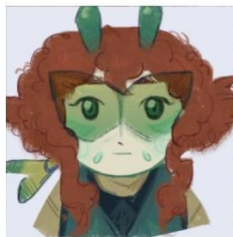
Contributors

Session Five



Willow

ssilentwillow   



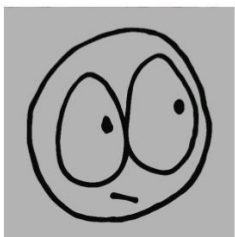
Minty

conn1ee_  
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Skeyt

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Vale

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Safe

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Moth

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Contributors

Session Six



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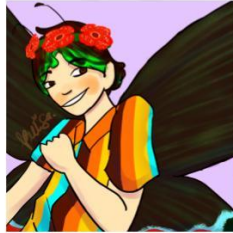
Lime

limewashedup  



Mou

moutone 
moutones 
_moutone 



Prism

prismartist 



Reyn

Flareyn 
Flareyn_ 



Tuna

tunastime  



Jaz

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jaz_it_up 

Contributors

Session Seven



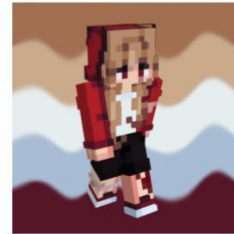
Vio

vyeoh  
Vyeoh_ 



Kairam

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kairam_ 



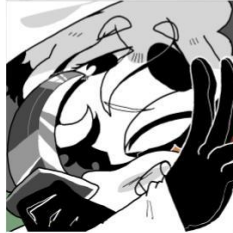
Azure

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Bea

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Hunter

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Spark

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Indigo

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Contributors

Session Seven (cont.)



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Grailknghtmonty
Grailknightmonty



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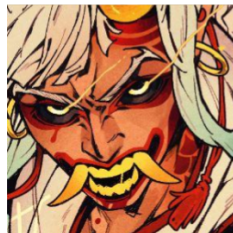
Avyene

Avyene



Kit Rein

reinfallz



Muppet

toboldlymuppet



Apollo

thatapolloguy



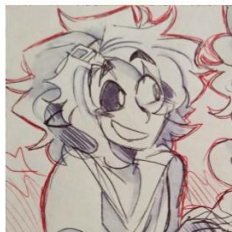
Contributors

Session Eight



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Makata

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Cooper

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torglives 



ZodiacDragon334

ZodiacDragon334  



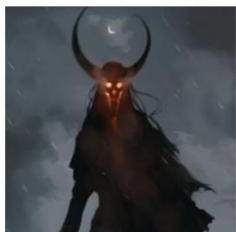
Knack

onAcar_ 
Tomatohorse 



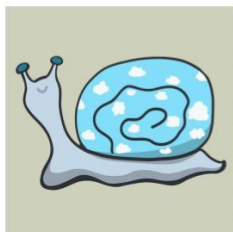
Contributors

Session Eight (cont.)



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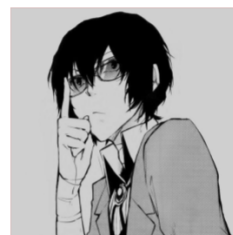
Intro

Introvertinhell 
introvert-in-hell 



Han

hannsh 
hannsh_ 



Imeda

roseaz_ 
maruyaaya 



Walnut

Wa1nutArt 
WalnutArt 





JAMIE
000





ア・マ・ノ・カ・マ・エ











House of the Rising Sun

Aries

To say Lizzie was beginning to regret her earlier suggestion to venture into the pale garden would be untrue, at least for now. She was, however, a bit... disturbed by the atmosphere. There was almost no color, and she felt like she was walking through an old black and white movie; her and Jimmy's bright colors sticking out like sore thumbs. Lizzie had found herself holding her breath on one occasion, instinctively listening for something.

Had it been further into the game, she could have chalked her unease up to being vigilant. But this early on, there was little reason to be wary of the other players; there hadn't been enough time to bring about animosity.

So why did she feel like she was being watched?

Not long into their journey, she and Jimmy had come across Ren and BigB and their agreement to join them had been a relief. Their tiny companions' voices filled the gaping silence, and it was a few minutes before Lizzie's paranoia had been put on the back burner.

They found a clearing in the woods, and while the others gathered saplings nearby, Lizzie managed to get a flame going. It wasn't much bigger than her hand for now, but the bright orange glow made the forest feel warmer already. She sat back on her heels, watching the fire and listening to the nearby conversation.

This pale garden isn't so bad, Lizzie thought to herself. It's just empty, and needs some life put into it.

She had just about convinced herself that this biome wouldn't be bad to live in, when she heard Jimmy speak again.

"Where's the sun at?"

Lizzie looked up and saw that Jimmy, Ren, and BigB were all a bit closer to the fire. The sky remained an unchanging ashen grey, but Lizzie couldn't help but notice the shadows within the treeline had gotten darker and taken on unfamiliar shapes.

“Well fellas, it's been a pleasure and I really must be going,” Ren said quickly.

“Oh, you're not gonna stay for nighttime?” Lizzie smirked, trying to make it sound like a challenge.

“Yeah, come on, stay with us,” Jimmy chipped in. “We have a campfire going and everything.”

Ren bravely agreed, and they all sat around the fire, cooking their food and chatting. As the light dimmed, they unconsciously kept their voices down to a low murmur.

“You know...” Ren said in between mouthfuls of chicken, “the only thing missing here is a fireside jam.”

Lizzie smiled. “Yeah we need a bard. Ren, do you know any good bards in the area?”

“Yeah I can get that sorted out, just gimme a minute.” Ren pulled a guitar out of his inventory with a big smile. “It's me, I'm the bard.”

“Aw yeah, this is gonna be great,” BigB said, settling down on his staircase seat that was much larger than he was.

Ren laughed, plucking a few notes on the strings. The low melody wrapped itself around them like a warm blanket.

“There is a house in New Orleans, they call the Rising Sun...”

The tension of the empty woods, the thought of something in the shadows, melted away, leaving them with the content feeling of a weight lifted.

“And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy. And Lord, I know I'm one...”

Lizzie hadn't realized how tired she was until now. She felt herself sinking into her seat, letting the tide of music roll over her mind, accented by snaps from burning logs.

Jimmy leaned forward and stared into the fire. The rippling glow of the flames filled his vision and shone in his eyes. A pulse of life in a place otherwise devoid.

BigB hummed softly along with the words, running his hand along the coarse wood of his seat. Something about Ren's singing made him think of kingdoms, and for a moment he felt very much like a war-weary knight camping down along the long road home.

After what may have been an eternity, or perhaps a single moment lost in a world where time ran differently, the song came to an end with the last few, softening notes. No one spoke as the music faded into the night, and Ren's hand hovered over the guitar strings as if contemplating whether it would shatter the stillness to begin another song.

Jimmy jumped at an owl's hoot, looking up toward the sound.

"That was..." Jimmy cleared his throat and gathered his composure. "That was very good."

Ren looked at the sky as he returned his guitar to his inventory. Night had fully set, and the air felt faintly charged, like the moments before a lightning storm.

"We should stay with the campfire," Jimmy offered quietly, glancing into the treeline. No one challenged him.

A sound like splintering wood crept through the darkness and Lizzie felt her blood go cold.

"What was that?" she whispered, looking around in desperation for an answer. The world was lost to darkness just a couple dozen blocks away in every direction, and no moon shone in the sky to aid them. Thin branches reached out from the trees around them, and they writhed in the steady breeze. Anyone, *anything* could be hiding just beyond the light, concealed by the... trees.

...Did that tree have eyes?

"What the heck?" Ren's voice was tight and he looked to the others for explanation. BigB shrugged and picked a large stick off the ground. Jimmy glanced back at the sky and Lizzie turned to the fire to figure out a plan.

In that brief moment when they had all turned away, the cracking of wood came again, louder. Lizzie shrieked and turned to where it had come from, the same direction as before. The same direction that she thought she had seen eyes.

The eyes were still there, but now Lizzie could see the tree they belonged to wasn't a tree at all. It was taller than Jimmy, and had an almost humanoid appearance, if you ignored the way its body warped and resembled old wood, lifeless bark covering every inch of it.

And it had stepped just outside of the treeline while they had their backs turned.

"D-don't look away!" Lizzie gasped. "It moved when we weren't looking."

Ren shuddered but didn't turn from the creature. "I don't like this. Can we kill it?"

"Dude, I don't know!" Jimmy's voice was shrill.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lizzie saw BigB turn and lift his stick threateningly. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly calm.

"Guys there's another one."

Ren laughed nervously. "Why have I stayed here? Dudes, this was a terrible idea!"

"Well how could we have known this was going to happen?" Lizzie protested, her pitch getting higher as she continued her staring contest with the unmoving creature, and hoped BigB was doing the same with the second one.

"Guys, I have an idea," Jimmy butted in. "Let's all link arms, and form a circle, and we can walk out of here."

“We can't leave the campfire!” Lizzie protested.

A branch cracked somewhere and Lizzie shrieked and linked her arm with Jimmy's.

“Yeah, alright we're leaving!”





sproutellini

SESSION 2

HUNGER



● REC

JAMIE
000







Hunger

Raven

The hunger was strong, and endless.

It felt like the jaws of a wolf clamped around her chest, refusing to let go — and Pearl had been around enough wolves to know. Sharp pain stabbed at her stomach, and her mouth had never felt so dry.

Her alliance demanded resources. Her mind demanded satisfaction. Her stomach demanded nutrition. So they descended into the mines, searching for unconventional food.

Their search was for amethyst shards; sweet, purple, delicate amethyst. They had discovered a fresh geode earlier, and the thought of the treats it held made Pearl's mouth water. Would amethyst taste like lavender? Would it be soft like the calcite that surrounded it, or aromatic like the potions so often associated with it?

Going for it without a plan has historically not gone well for Pearl, but they didn't really have a choice. She dove into a vaguely familiar underground lake with Scott and began to search. Neither of them knew where the geode had been; all they had was hope and hunger.

The former started to dwindle almost immediately, while the latter only grew. Swimming was hard when Pearl's stomach kept sending jolts of pain through her chest, and even holding her breath was hard, as if it was trying to eat the air she breathed. She pushed on.

It was Scott who gave the shout, and she came gratefully up to the surface, sucking in cool, sweet breaths. Her body was hunched from fatigue and the ever-present hunger. "You found it?"

"Not the geode — a cave."

The cave was overflowing with tooth-sharp dripstone. It covered the high ceiling, a sharp mouth filled with teeth that could kill if they came loose and fell. Still below, on the cavern floor, Pearl had to thread her way through a maze of

dripstone needles, whose points were so sharp they were invisible. The staggering height reminded her uncomfortably of her first death.

She forced herself to push the thought aside. This roaring mouth of teeth would hopefully provide enough food to fill her own — although ‘fullness’ seemed more and more like a foreign concept as her hunger worsened.

Scott bit off the point of a dripstone and made a face as Pearl followed suit. He half-smiled at her, and for a moment Pearl saw the flash of another Scott, one wrapped around the throat by their bond. Then it was gone. “It’s the equivalent of eating a raw potato, but I’ll take it.”

She could taste the coppery tang of blood as she choked the stone down. It landed with a thump in her stomach. “It’s a very over-cooked raw potato,” she replied, sizing up the gnarly material.

He laughed at that. “A really dried up potato that someone’s put in the oven for a bit too long.”

Pearl couldn’t stop the small noise that escaped her at the thought this time. Big, golden baked potatoes with melting knobs of butter and grated cheese. Soft and buttery on the inside, cooked to a perfect crisp on the outside. She could almost feel them, padding her stomach, filling her mouth, warming her from the inside.

And then the feeling was gone, and all she was left with was hunger, like a knife twisting in her chest, and the feeling of pure emptiness.

As they slowly descended through the cave, bags becoming heavier and heavier with their goods, more and more mobs peered at them from the shadows. Pearl decided not to risk her chances. It was only when she pulled out her sword — diamond, cut to crystalline perfection, shimmering blue in the torchlight — that she realised how desperate her situation was.

Imagine how good it would be to eat.

Shaking her head in an attempt to clear the thought, Pearl brought up her sword in front of her to defend herself. Her stomach took over, carrying it up in a smooth movement to her lips—

—it would taste so good—

—before she noticed and spat out the mouthful of diamond she'd managed to bite. It winked at her from the cavern floor.

The same thing almost happened with her sword. Pearl gave up on even trying to use it and put it away for safety, because her stomach rebelled for a bite of soft wood.

Yes, cinnamon-sweet spruce wood — would it taste of Christmas biscuits?

It all happened so fast.

One moment she was diving into the dark waters below for some delicious-looking amethyst crystals.

The next a splash beside her was quickly followed by a sinister hissing noise. Creepers!

Pearl flung up her shield to defend herself, but her arms were too weak from hunger. She brought up her sword in desperation instead, to at least block some of the blast, as she screwed her eyes shut.

A cool stone against her tongue.

The bittersweet taste of diamond.

BANG!

It didn't take her long to figure it out, afterwards, sitting soaked and shell-shocked at their base. In that moment, her brain had decided that food was more necessary for survival than protection. She had eaten her sword, and that wasn't even the worst of it.

She had died already.

Again.

She endured the laughter from her allies and forced herself to laugh too, despite the burning of her cheeks. She forced herself to wave off yet another death. She forced herself to eat a meal out of their findings.

They hurt to eat, and they certainly didn't fill the alliance up. Her death had been for nothing.

The session ended. The wildcard slowed, eased and finally stopped, and Pearl actually felt tears spring to her eyes as the hunger finally faded away. It felt like she'd just eaten a perfectly cooked sweet berry pie, or a full tray of still-warm sponge cakes, or a hot and hearty soup. She felt light, free, and finally, *finally*, full.

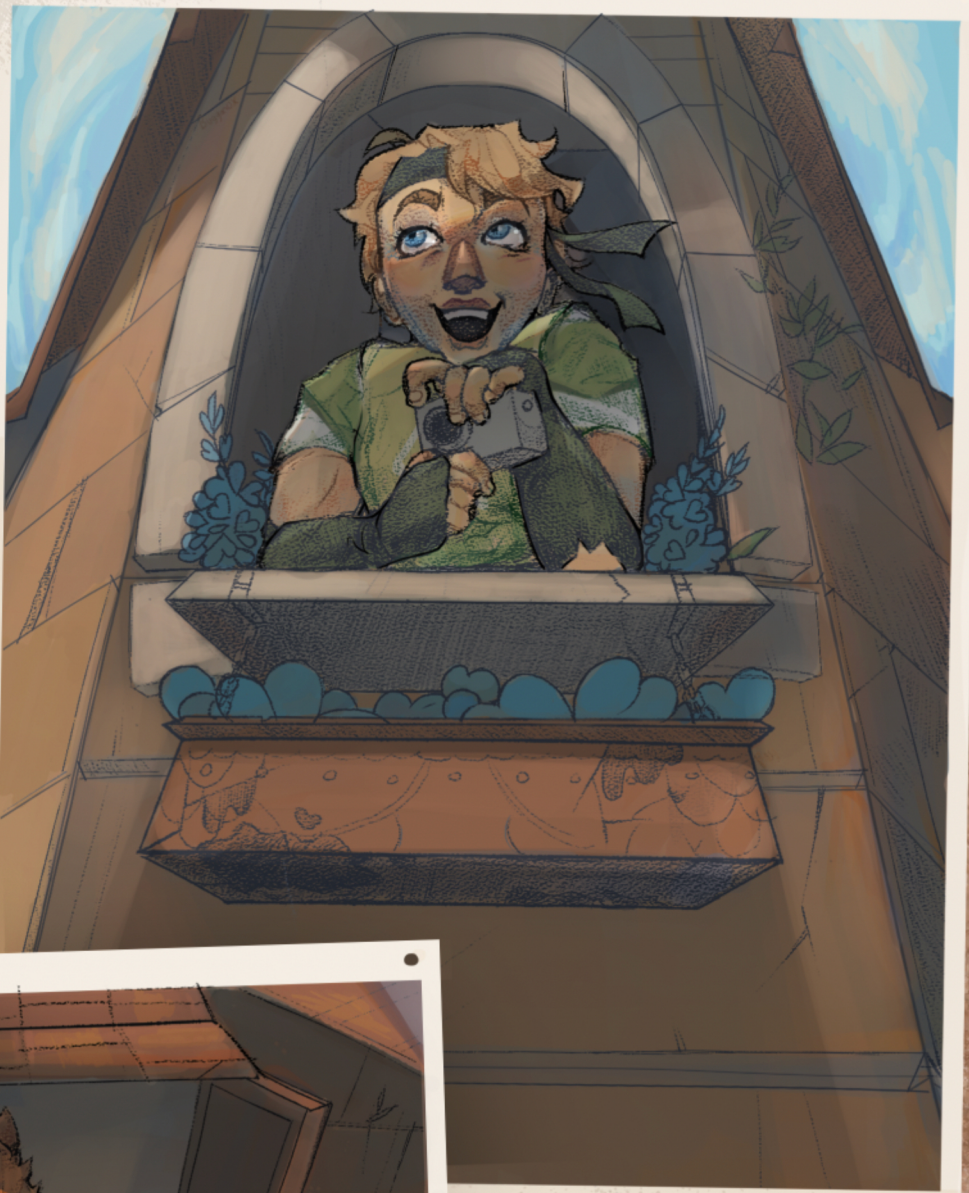
The relief was bittersweet.

A gnawing feeling began again. In her brain, this time, not her stomach. Pearl glanced down at herself.

There. Most of her beloved jacket had retained its midnight blue, but the very edge of one sleeve was stained an all too familiar red. Below it, her skin had already paled to an almost bone white.

Sure, her hunger for food had faded, but a new hunger was ready to take its place. And it howled for blood.





Bugganox



The Family



1. Install wheels

2. Check under the hood

3. Show your sweet ride

Material

A lot of deepstate

Role





forged in blood

Mas

Ren hears Jimmy when he calls out.

“Will anyone give me a life?”

Most everyone will ignore him, more likely than not. Most everyone will laugh at such a desperate bid for mercy; Jimmy, as always, so close to death. Who would give up their life for one such as Jimmy? What use would that be?

Ren has given lives before. He knows how that song and dance plays out.

He knows of the bond that such a sacrifice brings. He knows the feeling of his head separating from his body, of blood dripping down his crown and into his eyes as he gives and takes and takes and takes.

Perhaps it isn't about what use there is to be found in Jimmy. Perhaps it's simply the power of sacrifice, the gift that it is.

It'll hurt. It always does. Sacrifice is communication with the divine, and the divine is not meant for men.

Ren hops down from the tree he'd climbed, trying to escape the dreadful snail chasing him. It's getting close, anyhow—he can see its waving antennae cresting a lump in the ground. He needs to head out.

He finds Jimmy amongst chaos—people and snails running right and left, shouting to each other and trying to coordinate for long enough to save their lives. Mumbo especially seems to be having a rough time of it, judging by the repeated cut-off screams for help.

There's something off about Jimmy. It might be the loosened bow tie around his throat, carelessly thrown there. It might be the smear of blood on his cheek. It

might be the Red glint in his pupils, the way his eyes rove across Ren's face, one brow raised.

Something . . . not-quite-right. Something that makes Ren do a double-take—is this really Jimmy? Something about him brings to mind Scar, back at the beginning of all this, his eyes red and skin grey as he leered from his desert mountain.

He must be Jimmy, though—he doesn't raise his sword, even though he quite clearly notices Ren coming forward. Jimmy's never thought to fight first. So Ren shakes off his discomfort and approaches him.

"I come to offer my life," Ren declares. "I—"

Before he can say another word, Jimmy grabs him by the arm—his nails dig uncomfortably into Ren's skin, talon-like and just shy of painful—and drags him through the woods, out of this clearing and into a smaller one.

It's a moment alone, somehow. A moment between the two of them.

Jimmy shoves him up against a tree trunk, the bark scraping at Ren's back as his red shirt hikes up. Ren grunts in surprise, that odd sense that Jimmy isn't quite right returning. There's . . . something about him is wrong, very very wrong, a wrongness that curls around the back of his throat and chokes his senses with its thick darkness.

Ren's dealt with the divine.

He's tried his best to avoid the devil.

"What?" Jimmy demands, pushing way too far into Ren's personal space, until their noses nearly touch. Ren does his best not to cough—he smells like sulfur up close, sulfur and sweat and copper. Not the most pleasant of colognes.

"I will let you take my life," Ren says, one hand to Jimmy's chest and the other still in his grasp, pressed between their bodies. "I will—in exchange for an alliance."

"You and me, yeah?" Jimmy says, nodding quickly. "I've got your back."

“And Martyn,” Ren reminds him. “You and me and Martyn.”

This will all be for naught if it doesn’t protect Martyn as well.

“Right, right, right,” says Jimmy. Ren doesn’t like how quickly he rolled with that, but there’s nothing he can really do about it. They haven’t got anyone else.

They haven’t got much time, either. Shouts of fear echo all around, like so many crows screaming from the trees.

Was that cry another death? Did that call for help belong to Martyn? Where is his own eternal hunter?

There isn’t time to dilly-dally. Every moment is a moment closer to doom.

“Forgive and forget,” Jimmy says, and suddenly, he pulls back, drawing his sword. Ren drops without notice, bracing himself against the tree.

Ren’s knelt on the ground before. The soft, squishy dirt soaks the knees of his jeans—jeans, just jeans on dirt, not homespun trousers on the cold stone of an altar.

He’s bowed his head before.

Jimmy doesn’t strike, though. He circles Ren, the tip of his sword wavering.

Jimmy’s eyes dart from the edge of his sword to Ren’s neck, his tongue darting across his lips. “You’re sure?” he asks, like he’s never wanted anything more, like he doesn’t care what cost Ren sets.

Of course Ren’s sure. “You and me and Martyn,” he says. “Allies to the end.”

That look—it once again sets alarm bells ringing as he looks to the ground, tearing his eyes from the hunger that has consumed Jimmy’s face. *You can’t trust him*, Ren’s instincts scream. *He’s not right*.

Should he have consulted Martyn about this? Probably. Martyn's never been too happy with his deliberate brushes with the gods. Something about knocking on enough doors.

There's no time, though. A distant shout in the woods denotes another death, these wretched snails—and Ren's snail will catch up to them at any minute, he needs to get this over with without any second thoughts—

"Do it!" he growls, just like he did then, and for a moment it is Martyn and an axe and a night darker than the depths of the void.

"My lord—!"

"Ready, ready—"

A glimpse of sun reflecting across steel, projected on the grass—

Ren gasps out as blinding pain strikes his neck, as blood pools in his throat and mouth—

Then shoots up in bed at Redwood Mound, alone.

It takes a moment to still his heaving chest, calm his ragged breaths. Being beheaded isn't any more fun than it was the first time.

Offered defenseless on an altar, as bread on a table, always hurts the most. It hurts for the divine to tear him apart, to devour him and find what worth he might bring them, what they can bring him in return.

An alliance forged in blood. His fingertips tingle, curling—he needs to find Jimmy, bring him under his protection.

He's sworn now to protect Jimmy, just as Jimmy is sworn to him. Ren can't imagine loyalty going any other way.

But when Ren stumbles his way back to the woods where everyone else is, mouth still fuzzy and throat still burning, he doesn't see Jimmy.

He doesn't see him until night falls, until he spots him on the side of the mountain, Lizzie and Scar with him.

Ren waves up at him, even as Martyn tugs his sleeve back toward Redwood Mound, waiting, waiting—

Jimmy's eyes pass over him like he doesn't see him, and the lad turns away, headed back up the mountain.

There's something wrong about Jimmy. There's something wrong in the ruthlessness that had seized him, determined to get a life as if failure wasn't even an option.

Perhaps that ruthlessness will serve Ren in the end.

Ren has a horrible feeling that it won't.













WE'RE BACK WITH
ANOTHER PODCAST WITH
ME & MUMBO & PEARL
UP THERE!



WILD LIFE PODCAST
EP 4 - FOES & FAILURE







Teammate Togetherness

Finny

“We need to get you off of that Yellow Life.”

Jimmy glanced up from his inventory to where Lizzie stood. His teammate was leaned up against one of the stone legs of the Reputation Board, gazing at him with an analytical look.

“I know,” he said with a sigh, letting his shoulders slump a bit. “But I- honestly, I have no clue how I’m gonna manage that.”

“Don’t worry,” Lizzie said, taking a couple steps closer to him. “I have a plan.” A small smile grew onto her face, and Jimmy couldn’t help but mirror it.

“There aren’t that many free lives floating around right now,” she continued, “so take this stew-” she shoved a small bowl full of an unidentifiable substance into his hands- “and then trap somebody.”

“Oh-” Jimmy quickly tucked the stew into his inventory, settling it into the center of his hotbar before continuing to speak. “Okay, um, who should I go after? What do you think?” He was quiet for a moment, before adding on, “and we need to be careful about the speed.”

Lizzie’s grin grew. “Joel *and* Gem. If you’re careful, you could get two lives off them.”

“My one worry is that they might be too fast, they might outmaneuver us.”

“Mmm, yeah... Oh! What if I distract them?” His teammate’s hand dipped into her pocket and pulled out two of the diamonds Joel had given her earlier. “Say

something's wrong with my diamonds, or that he didn't give me enough, or something. And then you go behind them, and place the webs down, and then I PUNCH them into it!" She sprang forward, gently shoving him back to exaggerate her words.

"Yeah, yeah, I like that! Let's do it!" Jimmy grinned, grabbing Lizzie's hand and beginning to lead her down the mountain. As their feet pattered down the cherry stairs, a mix of excitement and fear bubbled into Jimmy's gut. He tightened his grip, and Lizzie squeezed back, gently.

Whatever happened, he would have his teammate, and that was all he could really ask for.

=-=-

Jimmy felt like he was buzzing.

He hung just behind Joel, taking small flitting steps, forward and back, forward and back. In front of him, his teammate talked with her husband, occasionally casting fleeting glances over Joel's shoulder to fix on the yellow life just behind him. She seemed so much calmer than Jimmy was... Jim honestly envied her nerves of steel.

Overhead, the sun and moon flashed through the sky, and every step took a fraction of the time it would have taken before, Jimmy boots scuffing through the dirt nervously.

They all talked for a few minutes, about everything and nothing- Tango's failed bridge trap, that had tried to kill Lizzie just a minute earlier, and the world speeding up. Until his teammate said something specifically, as Jimmy moved to be out of Joel's sightline.

“Can you give me more diamonds?” Lizzie honeyed her words, leaning in and batting her eyes.

“Wha- I gave you all the ones I had!”

“But it wasn’t enough for a chestplate...”

Jimmy’s heartbeat felt faster than a hummingbird’s. He wasn’t sure if it was from the quickened tick rate, or from the amount of pure adrenaline coursing through him right now.

Joel was exasperated, annoyed. His sword and shield were strapped uselessly to his back, and his hands were moving animatedly. He was too caught up in the conversation, leaving himself open to attack.

This was his chance.

He crept closer...

Joel shifted back slightly, and he froze for a second- but the green name moved forward again, not noticing the yellow life just behind him.

Just do it, if it doesn’t work you can run away, NO, finish him off with your axe, god, I hope I don’t hurt Lizzie-

He slammed the cobwebs down, and almost instantly, Joel’s legs were caught. He kept talking for a moment, before faltering, glancing down at his legs in confusion, trying to lift one of them but failing.

The second part. Go, go, GO.

He tossed all of the green and black eggs down onto the ground (look, he didn’t know how many would be needed to kill Joel), and they busted open with a puff

of smoke. From the broken shells, just behind Joel's heels, larger shapes unfolded, green and fuzzy, almost immediately towering up to player eye-line height. Their dead, black eyes immediately locked onto the green life in front of them, and one let out a tell tale hiss.

And then things started to blend together, going quickly, and not from the world speed now.

Joel screamed, trying to move his legs desperately, and Jimmy began to scramble away, and the other creepers began to hiss as well, all of their bodies starting to leak white light around the edges and from deep within their fur. Across the patch of webs, Jim saw Lizzie move back, ducking her head down and raising her arms to shield herself.

And then there was nothing but fire, and smoke, and a scream, and a loud BOOM!

The shockwave knocked Jimmy back from his already uneven footing, and he ended up on the ground quicker than he would have thought, landing on his back, the wind knocked out of him. He fought the shell shocked feeling for a moment, sitting up and getting air back into his lungs. His breath tasted like acrid smoke on his tongue.

A small crater lay just a few feet in front of him, and when it finally clicked in Jimmy's mind, he stared, slack jawed at it.

He had killed Joel.

He had actually gotten a kill.

Getting to his feet was a bit tough, because his ears were ringing a bit and throwing off his balance, but it was okay- it was okay, it was perfectly fine, because *he was green again.*

Scar was talking, from somewhere around, in a confused tone, and Gem was shouting in shock and anger, but that didn't matter either, because Lizzie was *screaming* in excitement, and threw herself onto Jimmy, pulling her teammate into a tight hug, spinning him around.

And Jimmy let himself scream back in euphoria, a massive smile of joy rising onto his face.

They would be okay. They would be okay for just a bit longer. Nothing else mattered, except the fact that he would keep surviving, and his teammates were at his side, protecting and helping him, and he would do anything to do the same for them.





SESSION 5:

TAIVIA







Counterpointification

Aris

Usually, Tango adored red. It was the star of his wardrobe, the brightness of the happy-fun-sauce he liked to dunk others in, and the hue of his entire career as a redstoner. He didn't know what he'd be without it.

But here—creeping across the roof of Joel's car, his name as crimson as his eyes—red was fear. Red was incompetence. Red was the all-encompassing, all-consuming tick of a second hand as his options for redemption steadily faded out of reach.

“Okay, here we go. Here we go! Question!” Ren was clearly audible, a gaggle of players surrounding his trivia bot on the torch-lit field below, but Tango tuned out the rest of his words. He wasn't in the business of relieving anyone of their bot right now. What he *needed* was to relieve someone—just one person at least—of their life, and there were plenty of dark-green-names in the vicinity to choose from.

Placing some scaffolding on the edge of the roof, Tango climbed it, procuring a fishing rod from his inventory and casting his line towards Cleo. They wordlessly stepped out of reach, giving him a warning glare and nothing more. Tango hastily reeled the line back in and cast it towards Scott instead, hoping to at least snag him before Cleo could warn the crowd. Scott noticed too, stepping out of the way as easily as Cleo had with only a head shake of disappointed amusement.

Tango scoffed. What was he? A nuisance? That wouldn't do. Despite having little experience with the term, he needed to be a *threat*.

The lively jingle of a trivia bot coalesced in the atmosphere as yet another one drifted down from the sky.

“I think that's mine.” Joel's voice—lined with nerves—from somewhere to the left. He was just as much of a sweat as Cleo and Scott, maybe even more so, and one of his lives surely wouldn't be missed. He jogged to meet the bot, the vivid green

of his hair streak catching Tango's eye. "I'm scared, guys!" Joel announced to the vicinity, looking wildly over his shoulder a few times as he came to a halt in front of the bot.

Dark-green paranoia? That should be an *easily* remedied affliction. Tango snuck to the front of the car, crouching out of sight behind the air intake.

"Tango, don't TNT me!" Joel shouted before activating his trivia bot.

Not out of sight enough, apparently.

Hardly taking the time to wince at his own callousness, Tango sprung into action, scaffolding up six blocks, judging the height, and scaffolding one more. He felt a devious grin light up his face at the semantics; Joel had specifically said not to TNT him. Although TNT was something Tango had in his inventory, he wasn't going to use it here.

A mace manifested in Tango's gloved hands from his hotbar, taking the place of his scaffolding. Borrowed from Bdubs, it was battered and unenchanted, the cracks in the polished metal reflecting the red of his eyes in multiple. Despite its appearance, the heft of it was assurance enough of its lethality. He didn't need it to last through the game. He just needed it here. Now.

"Who said this quote: 'Do me a favor: die for me?'" Joel read his question aloud, his dark green name vibrant and beckoning and appetizing above his skull.

Tango raised the mace over his head, his tunnel vision locked onto that hint of green that had presented itself like a porkchop on a platter.

Joel wouldn't miss that life.

Joel wouldn't *need* that life.

Tango took the leap, the world descending into slow motion around him as he let gravity do the rest. He felt the mace make contact with Joel's spine, the impact reverberating through his arms and up his shoulders. Joel died instantly, a cut off shout of confusion echoing through the air where he'd stood.

And then the world sped up again.

Tango stumbled backwards as he landed, everyone clamoring around him. Some were cheers, some were of disbelief, and others still were just to add noise to a cacophony. In the chaos of the moment, Tango didn't know whose shouts were whose, but what he did know was that he now had two lives to his name, which was lined in a cautionary buffer of yellow.

He held his borrowed mace close to his chest as if it was a trophy to define the gain, at the very least proving that he could be dangerous-with-extra-threatening.

"Don't mind if I do!" Tango approached the goodies that Joel's trivia bot had dispensed where he'd died, wanting to nab some of the cobwebs and creeper eggs before Joel could come back. "Don't mind if I do," he repeated, drawling the last word in satisfaction.

"Oh my goodness!" Etho's tone was lined with equal amounts of pride and disbelief, the first person Tango discerned through the adrenaline. Barely noticing that he wasn't picking up any of the loot, Tango gave Etho a triumphant laugh, the joy underscored by a jitter he couldn't place.

"Are you not taking the prizes?" Always an opportunist, Martyn stepped forward.

"I can't pick it up!" Tango tried to grab one of the cobwebs again, his voice strained from how hard he was grinning. "It's- it's only for him." He gestured at Joel, who was sprinting toward the crowd again.

"Oh, you devil!" Joel pushed his way through Tango and Martyn, snatching up his goodies from the ground. "The temptation right now to use these blummin' creeper eggs!" The streak in his hair was as green as ever, but there was a fire in his eyes now as he jabbed his pointer finger accusingly at Tango.

Tango could only cackle maniacally, running off immediately to rejoin Etho and Bdubs.

“Aughhh, I answered that as quick as I could as well!” Joel’s shouts of ire faded into the background.

“Tango, that was impressive!” Etho’s tone was still incredulous.

“Yes, Tango! Yes!” Bdubs clapped a hand onto Tango’s shoulder and the three of them ran back across the bridge.

“Tango! Good work, man!” Skizz congratulated him as they crossed paths.

Tango skidded to a halt and doubled back, catching up to him. “Sorry, Skizz. You’re the only red one now. You gotta step it up!” He winked and darted away from the remaining trace of crimson before Skizz could say another word.

“He did it. He *actually* did it.” Etho brought both hands to the sides of his head once they were back at their base, as if not sure whether to believe what he’d just seen.

“I’m so proud!” Bdubs added.

“That was awesome,” Tango sighed, the adrenaline ebbing. Be it sheer luck or something else entirely, he’d successfully landed himself a kill *and* a life. “Okay. I can breathe a little bit. I can breathe!” His name was safely yellow: something he could raise to green if he was feeling ambitious. Even if it was just for now, that sanguine second hand had stopped ticking.

Tango grinned down at the cracked, polished metal of the mace in his hands, his eyes as red as they always had been.







an explosive encounter

Safe

There is a certain simple joy, Gem thinks, in setting up a trap. Her arms burn faintly as she digs a pit deep enough to hide a lethal amount of TNT, the strain more akin to satisfaction than pain. The waves of robots descending from the sky to pepper her with questions have momentarily abated, and she's determined to make the most of the intermission.

She works alongside Scar, who, admittedly, is not that much help. He's too busy trying to dodge his snail to allot much effort into their shared trap, laughing in panicked distress as it inches closer and closer to him. But Gem doesn't mind doing most of the work, doesn't mind that it'll be Scar who gets the kill. She knows that she's had a part in the trap, and as long as Cleo ends up dead, as long as an alliance is secured with Scar, then that's enough for her.

Does Gem think about how easily Scar could kill her? Does she realize she's standing right on top of a pile of explosives, ready to ignite at a single strike of steel on flint? She continues to build the trap.

Finally, it's finished. Gem surveys her work while Scar glances nervously around for his snail. As a concluding touch, she flattens down the grass to form an inconspicuous path above the trap, then sets off towards the forest on the other side of the river where Cleo and her allies reside. The easy part's done. Now comes the hard part.

"Cleo?" she calls, hands cupped around her mouth. "Can I borrow you?"

Cleo emerges from the tower of her base, their expression pinched in trepidation. Their answer is doubtful and drawn out, suffused with no small amount of suspicion. "Yes? What do you need?"

"Great, come on!" Without waiting to see if Cleo is following, Gem turns and starts the journey back to her base and the hidden trap. She makes sure her hands are empty save for a precautionary shield, no sword or lava or anything that could harm Cleo. No, the harm will come later.

As they travel, Gem keeps up a steady stream of conversation. "I just thought—you know, we're always talking when there's a whole bunch of people around, and there's *finally* nobody at my base." She keeps her tone bright and earnest, catches and holds Cleo's gaze. Her smile is wide and friendly, her gestures loose in a way that demonstrates how unarmed she is at the moment. *Nothing to hide here*, she tries to make her body language say, *there's no ulterior motive*. "I thought maybe we could finally have a sit-down and sort things out!"

Despite Gem's reassurances, apprehension is still wreathed tightly around Cleo like a protective cloak. "I don't feel like I've got a problem with you, though."

They're passing the spawn island now, and Gem thinks, *Halfway there*, prays that her unassuming target can't sense how fast her pulse is racing. It's taking every ounce of her strength to keep the smile on her face, keep her voice steady and make sure it doesn't tremble with anticipation.

"Well, I don't have a problem with you either," Gem says. Cleo's teammates, though, that's a different matter entirely.

"Okay . . ." Cleo doesn't sound convinced, but they're still following her, still allowing themselves to be lured willingly to their death, a fish unaware of the hook embedded in its throat slowly reeling it in. "Why am I so suspicious right now?"

It's a rhetorical question, but Gem answers anyway, a sleight-of-hand of words to lessen Cleo's suspicions—or lessen her suspicions just enough to get her in the blast radius, get her killed. "I'm green, you're green, everybody's green. Joel's green, and he's my only teammate." *Lie*—she thinks of Scar sitting in wait by the trap's lever, his yellow name displayed prominently in the player menu for all to see.

They cross the bridge, and Gem swears she can already smell the acrid burn of gunpowder, hear the deafening sound of detonation. She passes over the concealed trap, hears the hiss of a lit fuse, turns around to face Cleo right as they say, "Yeah, now I don't feel safe at all."

Then, explosion—a sudden rush of displaced matter like a sharply exhaled breath, an earsplitting *boom* that Gem feels in her teeth, the ground heaving and tearing asunder, expelling smoke and heat and bits of shrapnel. Cleo's scream is cut off before it can escape her throat.

Gem turns triumphantly towards Scar, meets his victorious cheers head-on with ones of her own. She feels almost shaky, hollowed out, as if the adrenaline and tension she'd been carrying while luring Cleo to their death had all rushed out when the explosion happened, leaving an empty void behind that a flood of success is quick to fill.

Other players drift over, drawn to the aftermath of carnage like flies to carrion, and Scar exclaims, "That was all Gem; Gem was—big help, big help!" and Gem laughs in appreciation over Scar's commendations. The next time she opens the player menu, Scar's name is a satisfying green.

Later, Scar comes back to her as she stands at the top of her watch tower. "Gem, I will never betray you," Scar tells her, an earnest hand pressed to his chest, and she thinks of an arrow misfired into the back of her skull, she thinks of a red-hooded figure that stood back while a sword plunged into her heart, and she thinks: *Good*.

Flint and steel come together in a matrimony of cascading sparks, white-hot seeds of heat from which ribbons of flame unfurl. Flickers of orange and red and yellow burn bright against the dark backdrop of the night, bright in a way that compels anyone nearby to behold their consumption of anything in their path. The air shimmers with heat, the air is oversaturated with heat.

If there are any protests being made in the immediate vicinity, the fire does not care enough to hear them. The fire's only concern is how fast it can *devour*. The barn is the first to go, tongues of flame licking up the red mangrove walls and leaving only the stone foundation behind, blackened and ash-covered, the bones of a picked-clean animal carcass. Yet the fire's hunger is still not sated—it leaps to the posts of a bridge, crawling hungrily along the wood; it throws itself upon the crops and bundles of hay that border the burning barn; it wraps itself around the fences of a cow pen. It swallows up the newly built watchtower, the strong sturdy oak foundation mere kindling to the ravenous flames. Scorched ruination is all that remains.

Reaching up to the night sky are curling tendrils of smoke, thick and ashen and choking. The smoke wends its way through the air, clings to whatever the fire has not yet burned, sits heavily in the spaces of a person's lungs. Its scent will linger

here hours after the fire has died, a hateful, victorious echo of the destruction that has been wrought. Beneath the constant crackle of flames, laughter floats up to the sky, intertwining with the grey, cloying smoke.

Everything burns.





baby, lay your head on my lap one more time

Moth

“You’re gonna let me sword you in the face, then?” Pearl grins, leering up at Scott.

The three of them are standing outside Gem and Joel’s base—Pearl and Scott, of course, as well as Cleo, their presence heavy over Scott’s shoulder like it always is.

“Fine,” he finally sighs.

Pearl perks up. If she had a tail, it’d be wagging; if she had fangs, they’d be bared in a wide and toothy grin. “For real?”

“...Yeah, sure.” Scott hooks his thumbs in his belt. “Let’s do this.” Cleo’s words have swayed him, it seems—they’re right anyway. It *is* a tactical advantage to be rid of their last dark green, to take that target off their backs—and it’s better Pearl kills him than anyone else.

Pearl doesn’t bother pretending the tactical advantage is all she’s excited about.

That being said: she kind of hates how easily he accepts his own death. Where’s the joy in a kill without the preliminary hunt? Without the fear in his eyes that *she would cause*, the evidence that she means something to him that runs deeper, more visceral, than unamused annoyance? He makes her blood boil, and not in the way she would like it to. She says as much: “Well, you don’t have to be *boring* about it!”

Rudely, Scott ignores her. “Let’s do this at home,” he insists instead, and starts leading the way back to their base. Pearl follows him hot on his tail, like a hunter in the underbrush—even if her wildness is purely fantasy. Even if some part of her will always be a tied-down lapdog, her leash firmly in Cleo and Scott’s hands.

“It would’ve been nice to have a proper fight with you,” she tells him as she wades through the river, shoulders weighed down by her sodden crimson cloak. He turns just enough for her to catch a glimpse of green, green eyes. “You know. One-on-one, see who wins... But I guess I can take this, if I have to.”

Scott laughs. Cleo joins him. The two of them are inseparable and insufferable. She wants to worm her way between Scott’s rock and Cleo’s hard place and be crushed under the pressure. She wants to claw at the boulder with everything she has, make a little crevice for herself to live in forever and ever. It’s just unfortunate, she thinks, that her dull and scrabbling nails can’t even chip away the stone. Maybe she was just made wrong.

“Well, I don’t want to risk fighting you right now. You’ll just have to be satisfied with this.”

She snorts at his back and declares, “This is gonna be great anyway. I’m gonna take my time, gonna look you in the eyes... gonna think about some old memories. I really needed this.”

“So glad it’s cathartic for you,” Cleo cuts in. The sharpness of their voice lies somewhere between friendly teasing and genuine anger, as it always does when their words are directed at Pearl. By now, Pearl knows better than to be offended by it. She does the same, speaks to the two of them sometimes in uneasy barked sentences, in drawn swords and bared teeth.

They make quick work of the journey back, through the sprawling fields of trampled wheat and into the gaping maw of their fort’s walls.

“In here,” Pearl insists, beckoning the other two into the tower. “So you can set your spawn.” And because, well. A tower just feels right, doesn’t it? Scott taps the runes carved on their shared bedframe.

She doesn’t notice Impulse coming up behind her until he asks, “What’s going on?” Even then, she doesn’t turn to look at him. Why would she, when Scott’s finally just where she wants him, an ensnared rabbit? All she has to do is slit its throat and let his blood mix with the water. If only she had dogs who could lap it

up. Or... she brushes a hand over the pufferfish bucket in her inventory, and considers the benefits of slow and painful death.

With Impulse here, the scene is perfectly set. There's Cleo, behind Scott; here's Impulse behind her. It's Pearl's stage, and the roles are cast. She's the wicked wicked witch. Scott's a desperate fourth-act Macbeth. If she fully had it her way, he'd be here begging her for guidance and forgiveness.

The thought strikes her: she's finally collecting her debt from their first allyship all those lives ago. Two lives of hers, given to Scott in exchange for a promise broken with his win. One life of his, given freely and painfully in return. She certainly feels great, if in the way typically gleaned from the hunger of a red life.

"Let's do this," she says, and upends the bucket into the pool. Immediately, he stiffens in pain from the sting of the pufferfish.

His death is slow. That's the point, after all. There's no dramatic dynamite to be had here, no firecracker boom to herald Scott the generous, forgiving martyr. Just the pufferfish, and the poison, and his slowly paling skin. She drinks in the sight of his obvious pain. Her eyes are blown wide; she hardly remembers to blink.

"If only you had powdered snow." Scott's eyes crinkle when he speaks.

Despite everything, an unwelcome smile of her own tugs at Pearl's lips. She hates it immediately—hates *him* all the more for it immediately. She hates the way the thought of him tangles in her guts, the way she wants to thrust her sword through his chest and then hold his cooling body, cradling his face with her blood-stained hands.

Pearl *needs* to hate him, needs to be able to savor this all the way.

Just as the smile graces her lips, he dies. His body crumples into nothing, and then he's jolting out of bed and crashing to the ground. Cleo's by his side immediately; with their help, Scott manages to stand, albeit shakily, calf-like. Poison still trails over his skin, and Pearl hopes it burns still too, like the sparks of a flint and steel against the fuse-wire of his veins. Then she feels a little bad for thinking that; she's already gotten her revenge. They can return to normalcy again.

“We’re even now,” he says. His voice might be the only steady part of him. “Everything’s settled.” As if anything has ever been settled between the two of them. As if Pearl isn’t the moon to his churning ocean, her very presence stirring him up; as if she’s not an awkward stone caught up in his waves and dashed against the rocks over and over and over again.

“Sure,” she agrees, and when she extends her hand he shakes it. Against her perpetually-freezing fingers, anything would be warm—but he is especially. The flickering light of his match pairs so well with her red striking-surface. “We’re even.”

They’re allies to the death once again. The only question will be who kills who, at the end of things.



SESSION 8

Fig 1

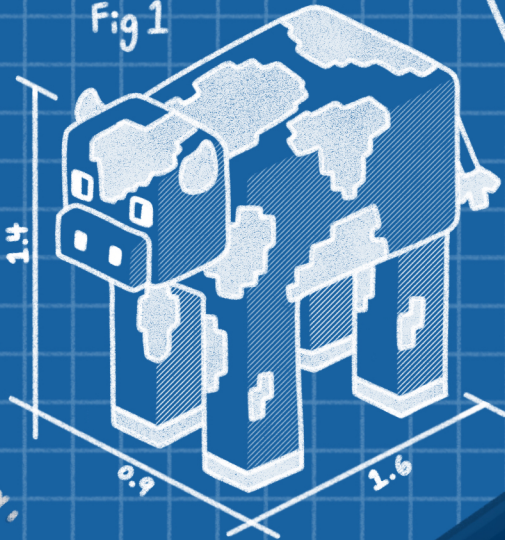


Fig 2

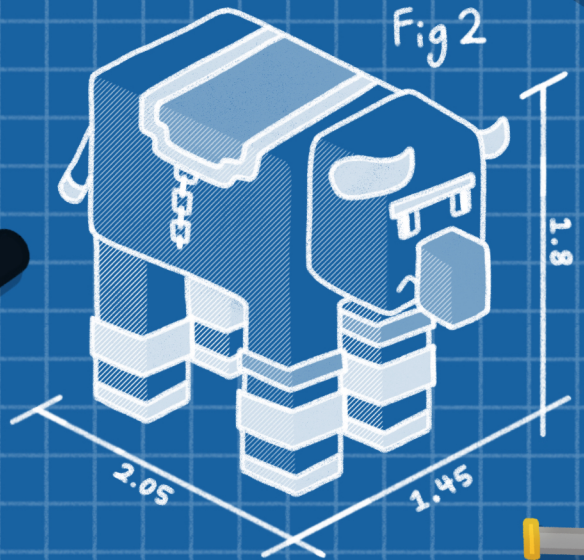
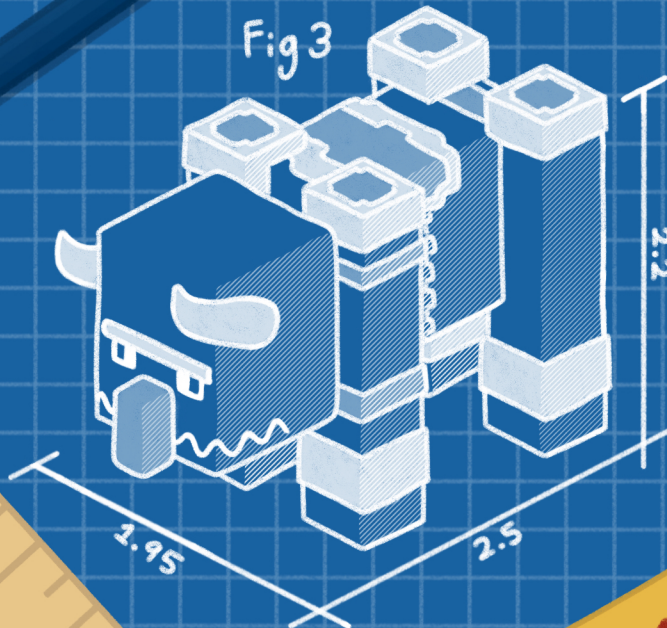


Fig 3



REMEMBER
Call Devs &
Dr Bracewell
TODAY!

REPORT
pathfinding ability
endency to murder
ways find you
run but you
rer hi

@phosphor's-noodles







Descansos

Mou

You wait in darkness.

A damp smell fills the air. Coldness encases your limbs, soft but unyielding. When you shift your head, you can barely make out dim spots of light amongst inky black. The walls of home saturate your every sense and it's suffocating — but *suffocating* is something you've come to know as comfort.

Your dormant body is well-kept from aching during this time. Where you lay on cool, dense padding, your hearing is heightened to its peak. You know there is an *above*, where all the trouble dwells, and every little tremor from them tests the fuse to your heart. They take up many forms, as you've come to learn. Some are thin and unbreathing, others broad and spindly, and a select portion, on curious occasions, solid and *warm*.

You find that the latter are your least favourite to deal with. In the moments where you chase the disturbances, they strike your skin with instruments long and sharp. Their strength is nothing in the face of yours, but unlike the other creatures, they return again and again with beating hearts.

It all matters very little in the end, however irritating they can be. You either succumb to just another eventual defeat, or they leave you to regain your peace. The culprits remain weak and brittle. Meanwhile, you return home and wait once again.

— This is how the cycle goes.

Not a single whisper crosses the expanses above, now. But you can feel it — sooner or later, ripples of vibrations will come seeking. The time to rage only draws closer.

Until then, your heart remains restful, your snout content with dank scents and your ears placated with quiet.

— Except, all of a sudden, they are everything but.

Something burns.

Your skin. It lays exposed to harsh air, glazed with warmth. You feel no contact but it's so far from what you know, the flesh may as well be blistering, spoiling, *rotting* in discomfort.

The image ahead is no longer solid and reassuring; instead, dark and bright blots seem to swim and dive around each other. Your walls are gone from where they protected your every side. Your feet are planted on fuzzy and unfamiliar ground — it caresses you, kindly. Horribly.

It's a dizzying illusion of *everything* and *nothing*, all at once. But worst of all is the *noise*.

A *chitter* to your right, a *wail* somewhere behind. Vibrations wash over in waves, soaking your ears while your body remains rooted. Gradually, a cacophony is pulled together, clouding your mind along with the realisation:

This is not home.

For a moment, something strange and unknown curls within you. The story sewn into your being, the one you have renewed countless times, does not path like this. It's all wrong.

Your lungs contract. *What is this feeling?*

There's a brush against the tip of your claws. You can sense a heart, much smaller than your own, attached to this object. It beats, gentle and soft.

Gentle. Soft. *Unpleasant.*

Just as quickly, that sensation constricting your breath evaporates. Something stronger, much more familiar and encouraging, now builds. It spreads from the center of your heart, through your ribs, to the tips of your horns, until—

Thwack!

You lower your arms slowly, exhaling. Your heart beats alone, *prestissimo* and thundering through your eardrums.

The first kill of each cycle is always the most indulgent — a brief reprieve for your senses, a small taste of vengeance. But it's not enough. An overwhelming buzz still coats the atmosphere. It must be ridden of.

So, you continue. And along the way, you learn.

This world is similar to the *above*. Only, it is stranded in warmth. The ground rises and falls as your feet take you any which way; it transitions from that awful softness to a texture sturdy and solid, but no less disagreeable under your toes. Occasionally you stagger in your urgency, nearly colliding with structures of more alien material that loom big and small.

The creatures straggling your path are only a challenge in their numbers; a single hit is all it takes to eliminate most. Some attempt to fight back, but still their bodies are frail, just like those in your world. There's little time to ponder any more similarities, before you've flung one silenced heart to the ground and moved to the next.

And then, you feel it.

A prick on your shoulder. Something sharp, pointed... *refined*.

With an odd rush, it filters into your ears: *those voices*.

They're here.

But of course. In this land of warmth, why wouldn't they survive?

You turn in their direction, snout working for a scent. But to no avail — they must be far. For now, you decide to return to your current subject. Shuffling forward, you raise your arms, ready for impact—

Another pointed spike lands. Then another, and another.

Your head snaps back to attention. An energy thrums in your veins like never before, for you know where the target is now. *How exciting.*

Stray presences block the trail as you travel swiftly to your new destination; they're erased within a split second, not lasting nearly long enough to distract you from your attackers. A deafening pulse reverberates through your whole body, and you hope they can feel it too. You can't recall the last time your rage also encompassed such exhilaration.

But it's short-lived — your constitution is weakening, much quicker than you're used to. Damage is not new to you, but as the frequency of hits increases, so does their rowdy noise. They are *many*, you realise.

Through the crevices of your focus, that foreign feeling from earlier sneaks back in. It jolts your awareness momentarily, threatening a falter in your steps. You try to ignore it. Your priority is too close now to bother with any more diversion.

And then, you stumble.

A miscalculation on your part, along with an assault to your head, sends you pivoting sideways. It's peculiar — you feel yourself fall then crash against something solid which breaks immediately, only to linger everywhere you touch.

The attacks stop for a second as there's a sudden burst of noise; their voices sound in unison, although oddly stifled. What broke your fall seems to act as a mobile cushion, righting your body and coaxing your now numerous injuries. It's cool to the touch. You make an effort to move forwards, but your limbs wobble uselessly half in, half out of the texture. All the while, projectiles shoot you back in place.

Ah... you think, is this how it ends?

You do not know how to return from this disorienting place. It feels so very far.

Their spikes continue piercing your skin. Your health steadily chips away.

You are helpless. But, a thought finds purchase in your mind: this strange, cold substance that flows around you, that smells of damp and muffles the static...

It almost feels like home.





Cobwebs

Prism

He removes the armor warmed
A pity the Skizz remains unharmed.
Yeah, he's got those scars, but let's make more
I still feel my skin burn, you know,
burn, burning away.
As Cleo's bound to have said:
Let's make him pay.

(Impulse, impulse
Look what I've got in my hand, see?
The shell is rough—
callous on callous.
Close to crushing it, I'm excited.
Just like I was, ignited.
With my eyes, I insist,
Watch this.)

I feel like—
There is a satisfaction to it, you know?
The crack, the sizzle, the blow—
He has no time to look.
Oh Skizz, you're cooked!
HA!
BAM
BAM
BAM!!
I feel no better.
I feel *much* better.
There is no fire.
This is all me!

"I just witnessed a cold-blooded murder!"

Isn't that familiar?

"...he's gonna wonder why!"

That too.

"What's your answer?"

It comes quickly, like it's always been true:

"He did it to me, that's the answer!"

I don't mean it, but now
I understand her a lot better.

Along the wall

stands she

with some spectators

all slack-jawed, and wide-eyed.

Toes curled.

Geez, is it so unbelievable?

I guess that's what I am.

A molehill.

But because I'm polite, I say, "Sorry,"
which is more of a

"Yeah it was me," really.

While I recite, I'm smiling.

Cleo says, "That's fair,"

Which is really more of a,

"Now you see."

She smiles back,
friendly.

There is no fire burning, really,
just her.

I rear up the trident.

Not so much of a flinch.

It does look good on her, forgiveness.

I wasn't lying.

Our bond no longer rent—
let's go out and get 'em.







How Deeply Rooted Trees Go

Tuna

It was important to keep a very careful, watchful eye on him.

No one had been doing this, of course. Too many people had written BigB off as some sort of outlier to their pre-existing equations, pre-formed alliances. Not in a way that had made him the *outcast* of these situations, necessarily, but rather in a way that had most, if not all, of his friends with their guard down.

Creaking should be watched for sudden movements after all, and nobody had been watching BigB.

Well—they had been for a little, their gaze like prickling nettle when he'd caught Skizz in webbing and killed him. His friends' eyes had slid off once he'd spoken—spoken something like *revenge*—a word realized more through action than physical tongue. He'd slunk off after that—after *revenge*—after another painful death. BigB had found himself back in the sanctuary (if he could even call it that anymore) of the 5Gs base. 4Gs. Whatever it was when he *wasn't* there.

He had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Cleo and Scott again, who had watched as he muttered out complaints about needing to get a *good* kill. It had been, as it had always been for a red-life, a bone deep urge, a physical necessity.

Cleo and Scott had mused in return—speaking the idea into existence wasn't anything like doing it *themselves*, mind, and if BigB happened to *pilfer* the supplies from somewhere, then *good!*

He had felt their gaze on him then, like a mark on each eyespot on brown-grey skin. They'd given him an easy trap, like he asked:

Dripstone.

The trap had been deceptively simple, a practice BigB had been intimately familiar with since they'd first been able to cut away the sharp limerock. Cleo had fetched

enough to make his carrying bags heavy. It weighed down his steps as he paced and thought over positioning. The setup would be easy to confine to the foyer of any base, easy for someone to step through a front door and down into a maw of dripstone points, easy enough to slice skin on impact.

Why not try something even simpler, Cleo had told him: A staircase landing.

BigB had run his tongue over his teeth at the thought, felt the pull of interconnected sight and hearts, as he felt out the server around him.

Jimmy had found him first, BigB's hands still dusted with limestone and dirt after carefully packing closed his tunnel from under the Bamboozler's staircase. Or rather, Jimmy had nearly run straight into him. Regardless of whether or not he *had* them, Jimmy clearly wasn't using his eyes—physical, metaphorical, or otherwise.

Just short of knocking into him, he'd stopped, and smiled, and his gaze hadn't felt like much of anything at all. Jimmy had simply moved around him with the ease that only another red-name could feel, smiling, laughing, like nothing in the world mattered more than the moment they were sharing. It had been odd in the same way that it had been welcome.

If BigB had thought it over (as he was doing now, all in this singular moment), it was a recurring thread in the fabric of these games: he was easy to let his guard down around. It was as easy as breathing, as easy as willing the world to let him pass through the small, fragile fold of time and silence and into the next, moving beat, undetected.

He had smiled back and had sensed the way Jimmy's hair stood on end.

Stepping closer, Jimmy's eyes had been wide to the whites as he looked down into the freshly-dug pit, and BigB had to swallow the urge that rose up in him, violent and oppressive.

If someone had been turning the staircase slow enough, they likely would have seen the perfect slice of ground missing, leaving only black in its wake. But no one

did—not even when he had pointed it out, not even when he had stood so deliberately as to make sure that his chosen target was his *only* kill. If he were being honest, Jimmy had slipped into his role then—one he knew nothing of—perfectly, halting Martyn and Grian’s advance up the steps as the Creaking heart beat solid in BigB’s ears. He could feel the world slow around him like he were dragging his hands through something tangible, like time were threads. No eyes watched his movements—it was a cold and soothing relief to not be pinned in place. The world had gone quiet. Not a breath, not a brush of wind through grass. Not a rustle, or a flit, or a heartbeat besides his own. The world had tunneled down to the prickle along BigB’s spine.

Lizzie, laughing, had rounded the corner, and as she slipped, BigB felt the world click.

He breathes as the weight of the world startles him back into a sharp, painful reality.

All eyes turn to BigB for the first time.

He feels the words bubble up in his throat as he’s held in place. Jimmy’s voice, sharp and shrill and on the edge of laughing, startles him first.

“Son of a—” he yelps. “*BigB!*”

BigB yelps too—mostly a laugh more than anything, his own eyes flickering over the crowd now around him.

“It wasn’t me!” he shouts. His mind scrambles to place blame—despite the obvious. His gaze snaps to Jimmy. “Jimmy! It was *Jimmy!*”

Jimmy splutters, squawking in protest, and as soon as most of the eyes leave him, BigB scrambles back, like a moth with its wings unpinned, a rabbit unstuck from a trap, pins and needles shocking through his stiffened limbs as he tumbles over his own feet.

“It wasn’t me!” He jeers, throwing it behind his shoulder as he stumbles down the stairs. There’s footsteps after him. There are too many heartbeats in his ears—too many people scrambling. Too many letting him slip away. He can hear Scar’s voice above the rest, shouting in disbelief. But BigB’s feet hit the grass, and he’s out of sight.

Not enough people were watching. And that makes him very tricky to catch.





etho at the funeral

Jaz

Etho knows the Life Series by now. He knows not to get attached to his base, because it's bound to get blown up or burned down — usually burned down. Not this time. His base isn't even flammable this time.

So, naturally, it gets blown up.

He really should have expected it. Grian's managed to figure out how to fling TNT minecarts at unnecessarily high speeds, and the stupid contraption's aimed directly at his base. He had hoped Grian would learn his lesson after Mumbo blew himself up, but no such luck.

He'll repair what he can in that smoking crater and get revenge later. Right now, since it was probably Grian who blew up his base in retaliation for Tango killing Skizz, he's going to have a very polite and not at all vengeful conversation with Grian.

"Alright," Etho sighs, walking up to Grian, "*who* blew up my tower?"

"That was Martyn," Bdubs says immediately, as Grian points over Etho's shoulder. He turns, and for once, Martyn almost looks like he feels bad.

Almost.

"Yeah, that was me," Martyn admits with a smirk. Etho opens his mouth to start an argument, but if he were Martyn, he'd probably blow up his base, too, so he doesn't.

"Etho," Grian interjects, "you wanna say some words about Skizz?"

It takes more willpower than it should for Etho to stop himself from saying *yeah*, no, *I'd rather do literally anything else*. He doesn't hate Skizz — nor Grian, for that matter — it's just...

Well, he only came over here to negotiate. The only thing scarier than an angry Grian is an angry Cleo, and considering Tango killed Skizz, Grian's bound to be *furious*.

The problem is, Grian doesn't seem angry. A little tired, maybe, but not angry. Etho planned for him to be angry, and he isn't, and he doesn't know what to do with that.

Etho rests his hand on top of the gravestone, eyes skimming over the sign in front of it. The handwriting is messy, but still clearly Grian's, as if he put it together in a rush.

Right. Grian's expecting him to say something.

"Skizz..." he starts, "Man, we love you, guy, y-you're one of the best out there, always keeping it real—"

He falters, then, when it no longer feels like grass under his feet, but cobblestone. The axe is heavy in his hands, though he *knows* it's not really there. The shape of the gravestone reminds him of Skizz, kneeling, waiting for Etho to swing.

Martyn pulls him out of his thoughts with a hand on his shoulder and a gentle, "Wrong gravestone, buddy, wrong gravestone."

Etho looks at the sign again.

Oh *snappers*, he's been doing this speech about Skizz in front of Mumbo's gravestone.

That's so embarrassing.

He can feel Martyn and Tango staring at him. Tango gets it, probably. He probably remembers why it's Skizz's funeral specifically that's messing with him.

"Oh, over here. Sorry, sorry, sorry." Etho laughs awkwardly as he steps over to Skizz's grave, trying to lighten up the mood and the weight of whatever look Tango's giving him. "Man, I suck at these!"

That, at least, gets a laugh out of people, including Grian, even if it doesn't come out quite as lighthearted as Etho wants it to. He lets his shoulders fall, dropping some of his fears along with them.

Not all of them, of course. He's the only one making a speech here, when it's *really* not his place to. Tango should be apologizing, or Grian should be saying something, or maybe even Bdubs or Martyn — anyone but Etho, honestly. The weight of the axe still drags his hands down, slick with what could be sweat or blood and Etho can't tell the difference.

Etho's good at the sidelines. He's good at starting small problems he doesn't have to fix. He's good at redstone, at minigames and music and things that shouldn't make sense but do. He's okay in a fight, steady enough with his hands at an execution.

He's not very good at mourning his teammates, given that only ever had to do it twice. Once for Bdubs, once for Skizz. Usually, Etho's yellow or red by the time people start dropping, like he is now, so he doesn't really have the time to think about losing his teammates. Maybe that makes him a bad teammate, on top of everything else.

Etho is a lot of things. But right now, first and foremost, he's absolutely *terrible* at funerals.

He shakes out his hands before placing one on top of Skizz's grave (and it is Skizz's grave this time). "Uh... I just wish he was better at the game, that's about it."

If he jokes about it, he doesn't have to think about it. Luckily, it gets another laugh out of Grian, but if everyone else's reactions — sympathetic groans from Tango and Bdubs, and a quiet "cuts deep, cuts deep" from Martyn — are anything to go by, he's not doing the best job of deflecting.

"His determination," Etho says more seriously, "was something else. Like, he was on that bridge, he was looking for the kill, you gotta respect that."

It's not a cue, but he looks up at the tower on the mountain anyway, at the tiny little bridge jutting out from it. He doesn't blame Tango. Skizz made himself possibly the easiest target ever with that bridge; if Tango hadn't shot him off, it would have been someone else. Probably Martyn.

"He was deadpanning all your commentary, remember?" Bdubs asks, as if that's a good excuse for taking someone out of the series. Not that Skizz making a fool and a target out of himself is a good excuse, either, but it's better than killing a guy for deadpanning.

But also, Skizz isn't — wasn't — his teammate. Etho really just... does not need to care this much. At all. He can't let anyone know how much he cares. He's supposed to be a Tuff Guy, and Tuff Guys don't care about other people's teammates.

"That was true," Etho says. "Let's get out of here."

He turns his back to the graves. He doesn't have to look at them. He doesn't have to care.

He *doesn't*.



WILD LIFE

NO. 7



VIO VYEOH





A Sleeping Bdubs

Azure

It's a sunny afternoon outside, and Bdubs is bouncing on the balls of his feet, waiting outside the Tuff Guys Tower, while he waits for the rest of the Tuff Guys to show up to their weekly meeting. There's only a few minutes left before the next Wild Card typically gets activated when Tango and Etho arrive.

"Hi Bdubs," nods Etho, calm as ever despite the loss of his first three lives, a sword in one hand already, the other stuffed in one of his pockets

"Hello, hello, my friends," greets Tango, cheerfully.

Bdubs grins at them, and more specifically, he grins at Etho. He has a *plan*.

And, in his very humble opinion, it is a very good plan, especially for Etho! He's being such a good ally, and definitely getting a good grade in it which is a normal thing to want, if you ask Bdubs, and very very easy for him to achieve!

"Hi guys," he replies, smiling at them, "So! We need a game plan for thee, good Sir Etho"

"Yeah, sure!" Etho gives a dismissive hum, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"He's got a point Etho" huffs Tango, "Me and Bdubs are both safe on our good old green lives! You, on the other hand, my friend, have got your yellow life, and we can't do any tradesies for lives anymore. You've got way too many aligences, dude"

"I'm working on it! I've got plans, I have a plan," replies Etho dismissively, "Besides, the whole tough guy thing is just a class act, right? Alliances are useful, I'm not worried"

"Sure Etho" says Bdubs, crossing his arms and shrugging "I mean, Tango and I, we're just looking out for you! We're looking out for our number one, is all!"

"Yeah, at this point, really, we should just wait so we can drag everyone down to yellow" adds Tango with a shrug "You get some kill-action and then we can just wait it out until we all go red!"

"Or, you could always go off, and y'know you do your own thing, me and Tango do our thing by ourselves." agrees Bdubs

"Alright! I get it, no need to gang up on me! I mean, I might just wait until we know the Wild Card gimmick, see how things play out. I don't really want to make this decision, you know?"

"Yeah, sure, yeah!" relents Tango

"Look, you guys are the ones with targets on your back, alright? Everyone's gonna be after you this session!" protests Etho

And, as if summoned by Etho's words, the announcement that another Wild Card has been activated goes out and the air around them shifts on some fundamental level. All three of the Tuff Guys glance at each other, with grins and Etho flexes a hand around his sword.

This week, they all get *superpowers*. Tango has super-speed, Etho can jump around like he has unlimited breeze balls, and best of all, Bdubs has the ability to slow time or speed it up whenever he so chooses.

It's perfect, Bdubs decides. They've all gotten a power that can be used to help get more kills, or to get out of sticky situations!

People chasing one of 'em? Boom! They mind as well be running through *honey*.

Mobs surrounding the Tuff Guys Tower trying to kill them all? Boom! The night is gone!

Bdubs decides he can afford to have some fun with it instead, while most of the server can't touch him, and winds up bouncing about, switching between helping Etho catch Tango, and helping Tango run away from Etho.

"Ethooo!" yells Tango, blurring past Bdubs as he tries to dodge Etho's attacks. Bdubs cackles, using his power to slow the both of them down.

"Come here Tango!" calls Etho, giggling "Get over here, Tango!"

After a few, mostly unsuccessful attempts, Bdubs is cackling alongside Etho while Tango glares at the two of them, barely concealing a smile

"The three of you are not even close to being murderous enough for a death game" notes Grian from his perch on the nearby hill, nearly startling Bdubs

"Death game over, we're having fun!" Decides Scar cheerily, poking his head in

"Bdubs, have you tested the rest of your power?" Asks Grian, conveniently ignoring Scar

"Not yet" admits Bdubs, shrugging easily "I'm waiting till bedtime to test it out, no need to ruin a perfectly good sleep schedule!"

"Well, I'm sure I'll know when you do" grins Grian, jogging back to his own base
"Later, gentlemen!"

Grian disappears, Scar calling a farewell to him. With an easy smile he bids goodbye to Bdubs, Tango, and Etho, before running off to go experiment with his own powers.

The rest of that day is spent checking out everyone else's new powers, which somehow includes running away from dead players—which, y'know, a perfectly normal thing to do in a death game, of course!— and either helping Etho find people to kill, or making plans to help Etho kill someone

Plans which sometimes almost didn't fail!

What's more, most of the plans that didn't fail were Bdubs' ideas!

He's such a great ally.

Bdubs grins at the thought, almost not noticing how low the sun is in the sky. Almost. He would never be late for bedtime!

So, once he checks they have a watch plan set up with Etho and Tango, he settles into his sheets. By the time he wakes up, the sun is already bright in the sky! And, Etho is rushing over, Tango on his heels.

Not mildly concerning at all, why would that be concerning?

"Dude! Bdubs, that was so fast" exclaims Tango as soon as he sees Bdubs is awake

"What? What are you all talking about!"

"The night! No ones gonna want to kill you now, you know" grins Tango

"All the mobs are gone and burned," confirmed Etho "You've got a very helpful power, my friend"

"Behold! My immunity!" declares Bdubs, now grinning alongside his allies "You guys are too!"

"We are?" asks Etho, tilting his head, with a grin hidden under his mask "I mean, I'm pretty sure I can still kill you and what not, so."

"Yep! Who'd want to risk killing you both if I can *control the light!*"

Etho just rolls his eyes fondly, flicking Bdubs' shoulder in lieu of a reply

"This is going to be so cool," decides Tango "Absolutely amazingly legendary!"

"The Tuff Guys are on their way to win it!" Cheers Bdubs, jumping out of his bed to loop an arm around both Etho and Tango, and the three of them cheering wildly.



LIPSY ZOMBIES



Starring

ZOMBIECLO

Featuring

MUMBO JUMBO - SKIZZLEMAN



KIDCITRIX '25

Time Left



my love will fall with grace

Norrgen

Superpowers are a finicky thing.

Some people figured out what theirs is in a matter of minutes, others took their time, but by now most of them have gotten the hang of at least one aspect of their power. Grian's been wandering around the server, checking everyone's progress and giving some pointers to those who struggle more (for a small price of borrowing their power, of course). He's glad to help them, he really is! Even if it means losing the quite limited time he has with his own power — well, Pearl's power, at the moment. Impulse figured out how to use his ability for evil very quickly, only needing a single tip that he could swap positions with others. As soon as he gets the hang of that, Grian's job there is done and he tries to take off, but Scar hops on his back with his own power, so, apparently, it's a two-person flight now.

After showing his passenger princess the world, they land safely on the Gs base, Scar laughing at himself for thinking that his power was vignette at first.

“And I'm like «I wanna have a complaint with the superhero department!»” Scar grins, mockingly shaking his fist at Grian.

He blinks, suddenly realising that Scar still isn't aware of his full power. Since helping people is pretty much his full-time job for the time being, Grian decides to be a good samaritan:

“Dude, you've actually got another element to your power that you haven't realized.”

“Really? What?” Scar asks curiously, tilting his head.

“Well, is it active right now?”

“Yeah, yeah yeah,” he nods repeatedly, so Grian punches him lightly: not enough to properly hurt, but it does bring both him and Scar down a heart or so. Scar stumbles a bit and furrows his brow, confused, so Grian punches him a few more times, just so the flashes of red are way more noticeable. “Wait, you took damage? How much damage did you take?”

“Well, check your armour.”

“Oh thorns!” Scar exclaims, looking at his equipped armour. “Oh my gosh!”

“Ha ha! You're welcome!” Grian salutes Scar and tries to take off as soon as he's done, but the treacherous tree above him blocks his escape, leaving him sprawled on the ground, cheeks flushed red from both surprise and shame. “Ow! My escape did not go well. Oh, that was so embarrassing.”

He covers his face with his palms, dragging them up to tug on his hair, frustrated, but climbs back up to his feet, swiping the dirt on his clothes away.

“I'll turn around, and you do it again,” Scar looks away for a second, pretending to give him another try to escape, even though his power won't work again so soon.

“Can you just like wait 30 seconds, so I can—”

“Yeah yeah, we're gonna wait. So, how was your day?” Scar asks him cheerfully, casually leaning on a tree like he hadn't just witnessed the failure of the century happen right in front of him.

“Yeah not bad, actually I spent most of it kind of explaining everyone's powers to them,” — which, again, he doesn't *mind* doing, but it does leave him with little time to mess around with his stolen powers, which he misses doing very much. Grian keeps glancing at his cooldown timer every few seconds and tapping his foot.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah yeah, so that's—”

“I wanna kill BigB,” Scar cuts him off.

“No, you know, he's on red and stuff, so... If you can go for the green names, that'll be cool,” Grian does genuinely try to dissuade him from murder, before promptly

remembering *he's* green and shutting up about that idea immediately. "So yeah, um. Oh, I'm ready!"

The moment his cooldown timer hits zero, he straightens up and spreads his wings. Checking that the sky is clear this time around (its blistering sun already reaching for him, waiting for him), he prepares for take-off.

"Oh you're green," Scar notices absent-mindedly, a second too late to even try and kill him.

Grian bids him goodbye once more ("You're welcome!"), gets a running start
and *leaps*.

With each moment in the sky, warm summer winds carry him higher and higher, till the world is but a tiny dot beneath him. All the structures that towered over him back on the ground could now fit in the palm of his hand. He's weightless here, now far above the clouds, held lightly by Zephyrus and kissed by the sun with the tenderness only a mother could have. She cradles him, envelopes him in her warmth, like he has always belonged here, under her all-encompassing light.

Receiving this love is as easy as breathing, an intrinsic part of his being that he had been deprived of for so long. He wishes he could bask in it forever, gliding above the clouds without a care in a world. He wishes he could stay here, with her, and his heart aches from just a thought of having to go back. He wishes...

SNAP

His wings collapse, melted wax dripping on his arms and back. How long have they been like this? When did her warm hug turn into burning heat without him noticing?

He got too careless, too comfortable in his place, and for that his sun has punished him. Oh if only he knew why he couldn't stay longer, but he doesn't deserve to. Still, he'd do anything to repent, to even have a chance to plead and pray and please his sun till he's forgiven and able to come back, no matter what it costs him.

Instead, he's frozen, barreling towards the ground, unable to do anything but watch as trees and mountains come into view. Is this his fate? Was he always

meant to be right here, in the sky, waiting for his impending doom as time slips through his fingers?

Maybe he deserves it. Maybe this is his punishment for being truly loved for the first time. That feeling isn't for him, for he can only take, and take, and take: take powers, take lives, take love. Perhaps now it's time for *him* to be taken away.

The ground is closing in on him with its embrace. In just a second he'll be gone, reduced to items scattered on the ground and 7 levels of xp. His wings have fully burned and charred already, and soon he'll turn to nothing too.

Perhaps it's bliss. Perhaps he should embrace it,

And turn his melted wings around to reach out to the sun.

For there is nothing left to do about his doom except to face it,

And pray for one more blessed kiss before he hits the ground.

He closes his eyes, breathes out, and lets go.

Grian fell from a high place.







Gem Projecting

Indigo

Gem sighed as she shut the gate to her cow pen, making sure she was tucked out of sight. Quickly looking around to make sure nobody was around, she pushed her mind out of her body with a jolt as she adjusted to her incorporeal state.

Suddenly, she became aware of two presences beside her. “I don’t know,” someone was saying. Gem startled. “They might have to leave...”

“Hello?” Gem exclaimed. Of all the things that she had expected to happen when she projected, this was not one of them. “What is happening right now?”

“It’s Gemmy Bemmy, dude!” Skizz said excitedly. Gem could hear the positivity in his voice, a large contrast to how he had been before his death. She could still hear the lightning strike, feel the guilt at not having done *more*. She had had plenty of lives after all.

She shook the thought away and tried to match the positivity of the ghosts surrounding her. “What are you doing here?” She asked in the most upbeat tone she could muster. Part of her still believed this was fake.

Mumbo coughed awkwardly. “We were following you around-” —“Why!?” Gem interjected— “-because we were just curious on what you were up to. Trying to learn your patterns for the next life series so we can be more successful in killing ya.”

“You probably should do that.” Gem laughed, still in disbelief that this was happening. “Mumbo, I’m sorry you didn’t kill me!” she said, adopting an apologetic tone. “Skizz killed me though.”

“Skizz!” Mumbo shouted, a comically offended look crossing his face. “I did not know about this information!”

“She let me, dude!” Skizz explained. “I know she did, I’m not stupid.”

Gem shook her head. "I didn't," she argued. "I *encouraged*, but-"

And then lightning struck and they were gone, leaving Gem floating in the astral plane.

-

"What *happened*?" Gem asked as she returned to her body and saw Joel's car in ruins.

Mumbo looked sheepish. "Oh yeah, I probably should've let you know."

Gem took a deep breath, reminding herself that Mumbo was her friend. "Mumbo, you had *one* job!" She put on an exaggerated look of disappointment before continuing. "What's the point of you even being here in spectator mode if you're not even gonna communicate?"

Mumbo laughed. "Well, it might've-" He broke off into another fit of giggles. "Okay, so there's two things that you need to know about this."

"The first thing," He said, holding up a finger. "I was only given the task of looking over what was happening to *you*, and nothing was happening to you."

"Oh my god-"

"Secondly, it was Skizz, and I'm kind of on his side, he's my other dead friend."

Gem closed her eyes and counted to ten. "I just— truly, I understand why you're out of the series," she said, ignoring Mumbo's laughter.

"I was just," Mumbo managed to get out between laughs. "I was just stood here laughing. I was like 'wow!'"

"I get it," Gem said, feeling like it was time to leave the conversation. "I'm leaving you now."

She flew back into her body, shuddering as she adjusted to being solid. "Goodbye Mumbo," She called out as she walked away. "You can hear me, I can't hear you. This is beautiful," she explained, relishing in the lack of response. "This is the way it should be."

-

"There we go!" Skizz said excitedly. "Gem, Gem, Gem, Gem, Gem!"

"Hey, hey!" Gem responded, beckoning the ghosts over to her. "Okay, over here, over here."

"I have to follow orders!" Skizz protested.

"Not when you're up here with me," Gem asserted, puffing out her chest in an exaggerated display of confidence. "Now you're mine."

"That's-" Skizz managed to get out between laughs.

"I don't think that's how it works," Mumbo mused, completing Skizz's sentence for him.

"No, it is." Gem explained. "I'm the only one here alive who can talk to you when you're dead."

"But there's nothing we can do when we're dead. We're just- We're just helping you out." The protest was weak, and Gem could hear the amusement behind the words.

Gem snapped her fingers as an idea came to her. "You can plant ideas for Cleo from me, and she doesn't have to know they're from me!"

"Oh that's true," Mumbo conceded. "I didn't even think of that."

"Here's the idea." Skizz leaned in conspiratorially. "Here's the idea that I want you to have. I want Cleo to suit up Mumbo and I and Mumbo and I want us to just hack Tango to pieces dude."

Gem nodded, mentally taking notes.

"That's what I want to happen, not that I get to have an opinion, that's what I want to happen," Skizz added hastily.

"So you want me to suggest that to Cleo?" Gem asked, running over the request in her mind. She didn't see a reason to deny the ghosts their revenge, and Tango probably wouldn't be too mad about it.

"I would love it."

"Yeah please do, yeah."

"Alright," Gem said, laughing a bit at the ghosts' eagerness. She returned to her body and went to find Cleo, already planning how to pitch the idea.

-

"This is outrageous!" Grian called out as he responded.

Gem completely agreed with him. "Grian, that was horrible," she responded. "I'll go yell at him for you."

"Mumbo!" She yelled, searching the air for her dead friend. "Mumbo!"

Mumbo held up his hands in mock surrender. "Go on, go on, that was good!" He goaded.

"It was," Gem agreed. "I'm so proud of you for killing someone and sticking to your guns like that."

She reached out and gave Mumbo a little pat for his efforts.

"But my God, why couldn't you do that when you were alive?" She demanded, her mind flashing to all the times Mumbo could have killed someone and gained a life.

“It would have been good, yeah,” Mumbo nodded, the same images probably going through his head as well. “I wish I’d had those skills.”

He chuckled to himself. “That is a little embarrassing on Grian’s part that he couldn’t kill me when I had four hearts. I mean, he’s never gonna live that down, is he?”

Gem joined in the laughter. “I mean, I did also take a swing at you so it’s a bit embarrassing for me.

“Ohh!” Mumbo gloated, beaming at the news of Gem’s failure. “This is the best moment of my life!”

Gem shook her head, done with the ghosts’ antics. “Alright, I’m going back to the land of the living.”

She floated back into her body and Mumbo fell silent.

“I decided I don’t like the dead.”









Queen of Nothing, Wearing Such a Heavy Crown

Candle

Gem's world was suddenly upside down. The sharp pain in her skull was intensified with a ringing in her ears. She was trapped, *trapped trapped trapped* and *oh no* this wasn't according to ANY PLAN EVER.

Where was she?

The last thing Gem could remember was talking to Tango about her astral projection superpower, laughing and conversing with him as he ran circles around her using his newly-acquired super speed. Why was she now somewhere else entirely? Gem scoured her memory, patching bits and pieces of knowledge that had started to come back to her together.

Impulse's superpower. He could teleport, as well as swap places with anyone!

People had been trying to kill Gem since day one, and now they had the prime opportunity. But she was so, so tired.

Gem's senses started to lend her useful information. The walls were purple and dark and restricting, they were too close, too sharp. Obsidian. Her legs were snared in spiderwebs and her arms could barely move from her sides. A couple blurry shapes moved around in front of her. Obviously people, although she didn't know who yet.

Gem needed to regain *control*, she couldn't let everyone know how much she was panicking. She tried for a cool, unimpressed tone.

"Oh my god." Good. That sounded exasperated, right? She hoped.

Gem slowly tried to wiggle her left hand, the one sandwiched between her side and the tight walls, free.

Don't act like you have a plan. You need all the advantages you can get.

The figures drew closer, weapons in hand. Scott, Martyn, and BigB. *Usually*, she would be able to take all of them at once in a fight. But this wasn't *usually*.

"WHY?" Gem tried for an amused, self-assured chuckle. It came out more like a nervous laugh. They were closing in from all sides, how could she be amused when she could *literally die at any moment*?

Gem's left hand was nearly free. Now she just needed to locate the sword attached to her hip.

BigB lunged.

By some miracle, she drew her sword with her left hand and was able to messily parry a few initial strikes. With her right, she tried to snag and tug at the cobwebs around her legs.

Martyn slashed at her left.

Gem growled with fury.

She couldn't get there in time to deflect his sword, and now her left shoulder was soaked in blood, blood everywhere, dripping down her arm and soaking into her tunic. Raw pain sparked beneath her skin.

"Oh no!" Martyn cried.

"Sorry, Gem." BigB quipped as he aimed to cut a gash along Gem's right arm. She ducked, only slightly fast enough.

Gem was the most tense she had ever been, but her assailants were all laughter and grins. Gem took a quick breath and reassessed the situation. This was the perfect time for a *different* plan. Could she—?

Gem switched her sword to her right hand and grasped at her pack with her left. Her shoulder, bloodied and destroyed from before, sent a stab of pain ricocheting through her bones.

She screamed.

Her parries were growing increasingly frantic and sloppy. Scott jabbed from behind, and really, it was a miracle she was able to dodge in this tiny, cramped space. Her fingertips finally grasped something cool and heavy. A bucket of water. Her stress was barely concealable as she removed the lid and smashed the bucket on the sharp obsidian above her, letting water rain down and pool around her. There was no way this was going to work, but she had to act like it would.

“Oh, the swim, is that gonna work?” Martyn teased.

The water was filling up Gem’s obsidian prison, and quickly. Soon it would reach the little window of space near Gem’s shoulders. BigB braced his left hand on the outside of the obsidian box, forcefully slashing his sword into what would’ve been Gem’s neck had she not ducked at the last moment.

Gem was now entirely underwater, compressed into a tiny pocket of space, unable to breathe and barely able to think. Her left shoulder throbbed, sending knives up her neck. But she had to *focus*. There was only one way out, and Gem needed to pull it off without acting intimidated.

With the last burst of her energy, Gem launched through the water, out of that too-small window of space, tumbling onto the grass as a thousand fireworks sparked through her. She tried for a self-assured laugh. Water and blood pooled around her. Her fingernails gripped into the ground.

Her assailants were reeling, Martyn offering a half-smile in amusement, BigB entering a state of awe and shock. Gem grunted, and attempted to claw at the grass and pull herself onto her legs.

Control. She had it now. It would take more than an indestructible cage to beat her. But her legs were too weak, she realized as she stood upright. They felt like honey. Her mind was filled with fire, burning it up from the inside.

NO. Forcefully, as if by sheer will alone, Gem stumbled away, breaking into something attempting to mimic a run. She was almost to the river. Behind her, Scott had regained his senses and started sprinting towards her, sword in hand. If only she could get there, maybe—

Scott stabbed at her chest. Gem deflected the strike, but the force of the hit knocked her back.

Stay calm. You've got this.

Gem giggled again as red clouded her vision. It was all a facade. Inside, she was desperately clutching onto the possibility that she could make it out alive. But she couldn't let them know. She reached to her right for the sword that fell out of her hand. It was almost in her grasp, she just needed to—

The blow came from behind. Everything went dark.

“IT ALMOST WORKED!” Gem cried as soon as she respawned and was able to pull her eyes open. If she had only made it to the river, if she had been able to heal herself...maybe things would've been different. Her left shoulder was sore, as well as the back of her neck. She assumed that was where Scott had stabbed her.

Everything was too much.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

He was a GREEN! He shouldn't have been able to finish her off. Silent rage simmered beneath Gem's skin.

The redhead shut her eyes tight and opened them again.

She needed to recalibrate, salvage what she could of the carefully-crafted, perfectly-built narrative around herself that she had worked so hard building up.

The plan that quickly took shape in her mind would be to laugh it off, pretend like she was completely unbothered, then go talk to Scott and find out what the *void* that was. Yes. That would do.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

Gem plastered an approximation of a smile onto her bruised, scratched face. Everything would be fine.

She just needed to stay in control.











for a martyr

Apollo

martyn

your body shakes.
endless tread towards ruin
you know it well.
your feet know this ground.
you swear you've been here;
slain.
pride chokes your veins
the sickest drug
no matter how hard you try
something that was your own choice
ends you.
aren't you sick of
walking on paved earth?
aren't you sick of
mistakes?
you ought to learn
that
you are alone in this grave.
no hands will raise you
screaming, from the earth;
an act of gods.
aching for rest.
suddenly,
so much of you belongs
to a grave.
to an unending battle.
this is a pattern.
neverending,
bitter.
dying on your own sword.
for a martyr,
you are half the man you used to be.

ren

your Hand shakes.
always.
clasp it tight to your chest.
your eyes know this face.
because this is the same.
slaughtered.
your heart is
poisoning you.
you cannot escape
it catches up to you and
will always end you.
treading ground you've seen:
aren't you exhausted,
stumbling through your
flaws?
dual hearts do not an immortal make.
half a soul is irrelevant
you are alone.
desperate
for someone to end this chaos.
you have not stopped running,
suddenly, it is not to the end.
you are not yourself.
to someone else.
to a cause you do not believe in.
you are trapped.
a pattern that loops
until the blood hardens
thick as iron.
steady as steel.
a fitting death.



Session 8



IMMORTAL SNAIL

A SNAIL WILL FOLLOW YOU AND KILL YOU IF YOU TOUCH IT

~~WILD~~ LIFE

THE ENDING IS YOURS...

SIZE SHIFT

JUMP TO BIG AND TO SMALL



~~WILD~~ LIFE



THE ENDING IS YOURS...

...MAKE IT WILD



WHO WILL WIN?

- A. LEO
- B. REN
- C. GRIAN
- D. JOEL



MOB SWAP

MOBS ARE REPLACED





This Turbulence Wasn't Forecasted

Sera

Martren. DNA abomination.

Ever since he— they? What do you call yourself when you've been split in two and then molded into one again? He will have to do— finished last session, he's tried to process. He's tried to process many things: the fact that the base had one less person than it did before, the fact that only half of his face stared back at him in the mirror, a haunting reminder of all he's lost.

He didn't tell Grian about the mishap. He'd find out soon enough, and selfishly, he wanted to keep this part of Martyn he'd somehow fused to himself. It was like he wasn't allyless as the final session dawned. It was like he and Martyn were trying to cross that finish line together. The power of friendship, and all of that!

Martren doesn't know if it will be enough.

He ghosts through the session all the same, unflinching as wild cards appear left and right, desperately seeking someone to call his ally in these final moments. When his loyalty is so fierce he became the thing he lost, it makes sense loneliness is not in his nature. He gravitates towards people, which is why he finds himself wandering along, looking for more friends to stand alongside while the final dash for materials and weapons commences.

"Where is the Bean?"

His ears stand upright, alert as he catches a voice drifting on the wind, coming from Gem and Joel's base. Even with the cartoonish tone, he'd recognize it anywhere. A distorted mockery of it often leaves his mouth when he tries to speak. He walks towards it without even thinking, standing at the walls and staring at the speck of green and yellow zipping past Gem. He's carried on talking, but Martren doesn't even process the words. His only focus is on the steady falls

of his feet as he chases the zombie across the bridge, the rhythmic rippling of the water propelling him faster.

His words are warped as he calls out, his body attempting to recreate the voice that made him smile many a time. “Martyn? Is that you?” The figure turns.

Even staring at a mirror couldn’t prepare him for seeing Martyn’s face looking back at him now.

Martyn looks different. Of course he does— he’s dead, part of the roaming legion of zombies. Stitches litter his skin, now a pale grayish-green, rotting. The left half of Martren’s body twinges in sympathy, recognizing its mimicry is inaccurate because of just how *alive* it is. Most startling perhaps, is the bright blue gaze dulled to something grey, murky.

What do you do when the reflection is more alive than the one looking into the mirror is?

“It is not— I am the lich of Her Lichesty Lizzie.” If it was the Martyn he knew the phrase would have no doubt been accompanied by a grandiose flourish, fit of a servant of a Red King. Instead all there is is a blank stare.

That in and of itself is wrong. Martyn’s gaze had always been so full of life, mirth and laughter sparkling in that shining blue. It had put Ren at ease even in the most stressful situations.

Now, there is no recognition in his eyes. There is no joy, or anger, or even pity for what Martren had become. There is nothing at all.

“It is rather strange to meet you. I am Martren, DNA abomination.” He nods in greeting, glancing up at Martyn, not content to look away for even a moment.

Even in his undead state, Martyn jokingly gives him a look over. “Half of you is VERY cute, the other half not so much.”

A small, lopsided grin finds its way onto his face. “That was a terrible thing to say to someone already suffering such an immense loss, Mart- zombie freak.”

Denial. It's powerful, isn't it? Denial is what changed Ren on a molecular level, the belief that Martyn couldn't be gone. Now, denial is what's stopping the name of his closest ally from leaving his lips, because admitting he's the zombie in front of him is admitting he's all alone. That this husk in front of him that does not know his name is the same person he laughed with for seven sessions.

Martyn does not notice, and for that, Martren is grateful. "And calling me a freak is not offensive?"

"It is very offensive- an eye for an eye, as they say!" He crosses his arms, holding his chin up, standing firm in his word choice! It's a REASONABLE thing to say in response to your face being INSULTED-

An axe finds its way under his chin. He freezes, feeling how the cold metal presses just below his Adam's apple. He gulps, staring down at Martyn's face. It hasn't changed expressions, still playful, still holding no recognition to the man he's threatening.

"If the loss is so great- would you like me to put you out of your misery?" He uses the same cartoonish voice he's been using this entire conversation, even as the blade presses closer. This is a death game. It could end for Martren at any moment, just like it's ended for countless people before him.

"I'd rather not, if that is okay." His ears airplane on his head, his voice pitching up in nerves. He doesn't think Martyn will swing the weapon. This is not the time for that, and it is not the game for it either.

He watches those dull eyes look him up and down, like he's debating if he should eliminate a threat to Lizzie before it ever comes her way. His voice is careful when he speaks. "I can't make any promises. If Her Lichesty demands it you shall be killed."

"Understood."

He doesn't know if Martyn cares about the tremor in his voice, or the fear in his eyes. He pretends he does. He pretends that's the reason he lowers the axe, allowing it to return to his inventory. He does a little bow.

“Good day.”

Martren goes to copy the motion, about to fall into the familiar routine of playing off of his banter, despite his trembling. “Good-“

Martyn turns, his utterly blank face becoming hidden from Martren’s view. It’s with little fanfare he runs off, the distance he’s putting between them not even an afterthought. Martren finds himself frozen, hand outstretched as if to stop him. He stares unblinking, ignoring how his eyes burn until he’s nothing more than a speck in the distance. His voice is hoarse when he whispers. “Goodbye, Martyn.”

It’s like the world has paused, as he takes a moment to collect himself. It feels like part of him has left too, leaving him winded, breathless. Despite his aimlessness now that his purpose is gone, he has to refocus. There’s a game to win, a game he has to win for him. So maybe he can join those upper ranks of skill in his name. So maybe Martyn will learn of it and look at him proudly.

So maybe this suffering will all be worth it.



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Pearl
finally
land her
hit this
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"Kiss of Death"





the universe, an answer

Cooper

Dying, Lizzie thinks, is exactly like living.

After everything, it ends the way it always does, and Lizzie is left to collect the pieces of herself she had put aside for a death she had not lived up to, one that played dirty. Sometimes, she dreams of going out on her own terms, a delicacy—though, she knows that this is unrealistic. She dreams of dying her own death, something that belongs uniquely to her, something which is not collateral. She always hopes, and she always dies overshadowed by something *greater*.

So, dying follows in the same footsteps as living; it's a sad, miserable thing, and she is always left disappointed. She tries desperately to hold on to what remains, to what's left that's still her own, but it always slips through her fingers—grains of sand following the turn of the hour glass, falling *down, down, down* and disappearing from beneath her feet. What's left is nothing but her palms, capable of so much but never able to prove it. What's left is the cold, empty space where there had once been something living.

All of this is to say, Lizzie never wins.

At the end of the world, Jimmy is all she has left.

She had tapped her fingers one after the other on the arms of her chair, and waited for Jimmy to come barreling down the ladder. Her voice, a robotic trill that got stuck in her throat.

Scar was dead, and she had needed to pull herself together. She needed to pull the two remaining Bamboozlers taut, intertwine them, and make them unbreakable.

The bunker smelt of dirt and metal, and she had grown more worried the longer Jimmy went without getting there *safely, alive*. She thought of dying for him there, once—giving her life to him—she thought of having to do it again, and she wondered if anyone would do the same for her.

Jimmy entered the bunker, safe and sound, and it's then that the world decides to end.

It's a sick joke, really, a facade of hope.

Lizzie dies voiceless, and honestly, maybe she should've seen that one coming. Dying without the possibility of cementing herself in the world at all, unable to speak and reach out, unable to let someone, *anyone*, know that she was here too—it's typical.

She has nothing left to a name which she can't even speak, corporal reduced to sand in the hourglass that gravity will always pull back down. *It always ends like this, doesn't it? Why would this time have been any different?*

She's unsure if Grian knows she's there, if he means for her to take the brunt of the explosion, but it doesn't matter—Grian pushes a button, and her world ends with a *click*, *hiss*, and a blinding light. It doesn't matter, because she dies anyway, alone with her thoughts and completely unheard.

She has so many questions unanswered, so many curiosities that died with her—plans, jokes, vengeance that never saw the light of day—countless things that remained trapped in her chest.

None of it matters.

As it all slips from between her fingers, and before she spends another eternity in a lonely cold, she hopes that the next time will be different. She always hopes, and she always knows better than to believe something so far from reality.

The last thing Lizzie thinks is, *"What else could I have done?"*

To this, the universe says nothing at all.

Dying, Jimmy thinks, is nothing at all like living.

Right after that, he thinks *"Gosh, that sounds stupid."*

What he means by this, really, is that dying is not nearly as satisfying as he'd have liked it to be. Not that dying, elimination, kicking the bucket, the works—is ever satisfying during these games. That's exactly the problem. He spends the moment he spawns chasing something uncatchable, always two measly steps behind and never able to grab that *thing* by the collar and over-take it. Sometimes he gets closer than usual, like today, like yesterday, like last year. Sometimes he's the furthest he's ever been, which would be every time before those last few.

He's not *close*, but he's closer now than he's ever been. He was close enough this time that the warmth had spread up his fingertips, to his arms, and tried to weasel its way into his final, blood-red heart. He'd never felt that before, which must mean that he was getting there—it rings in his ears that he had a chance, a real one this time. The explosives that Grian sets off under the bunker ring in his ears, too. He wonders, irrationally, if maybe it's been the same thing.

All of this is to say, Jimmy never wins.

At the end of the world, Lizzie is all he has left.

Scar dies before the two of them can get the chance, and she calls him home. Of course, Jimmy listens—he doesn't bother waving goodbye to the people he's with, and hits the ground running.

Lizzie had already been there, waiting.

Her words had gotten lost in various tones and beeps, and her mouth moved around what were definitely words, but no proper sound came out of it. The robotic trill bounced off of the bunker's walls, and Jimmy's heart had sunk to his stomach.

"Oh no,"

She had made another noise, one easier to understand if he had the time. He tries, still, to make sense of the dipping vowels—tries to lip-read, to make anything out of what she's trying to tell him, because what *else* is he supposed to do? She's his teammate. She's all that he has left.

It's futile, it always is, because he doesn't even get the time to open his mouth. Whether it was to ask her to repeat herself, or complain, or maybe even laugh at the absurdity—he doesn't remember what he was going to do. Another thing about dying is that you don't really remember much about what happens directly *before*. It always goes the same way: you're alive, and then suddenly you aren't anymore, the in-between gets a little bit blurry. It all hurts for a moment, and then everything gets really bright before it all goes dark.

Everything starts to hurt when Grian lights a fuse and says, *"It was always going to be like this, Jim."*

Lizzie goes before he does, he knows that much, but he also knows that the technicalities don't really matter. He knows, for a moment, of the irony that Grian had caught Lizzie first in a trap that wasn't retribution for anything *she* had done, but for his own nuisance. He wonders, irrationally, if maybe it's the same thing. Maybe Jimmy had doomed her the moment he led her home to Scar.

The second last thing Jimmy thinks before everything fades away is, *"This wasn't meant for her,"*

None of it matters.

He's out long before he can catch the uncatchable, before he can chase down the universe and force it to slow down. He dies warm in the light of the explosion, unfulfilled.

The last thing Jimmy thinks is, *"How is this fair?"*

To this, the universe whispers, *"It was always going to end like this."*





I can see the end is right in front of me (Don't take it from me)

ZodiacDragon334

The air tasted of lightning and decay as music faded away. Impulse let the power gather in his fingertips before he summoned his new superpower. It plunged him into darkness. He turned in place while the laughter of his allies faded into groans and cracks parting the earth; tension building in the air and lingering over his skin.

Lightning chased the shadows away where the number of allies within the circular cobblestone barrier had instantly doubled.

Impulse grinned.

Perfect.

"Who's our master?" Martyn drawled from below, hauling himself up off the pale moss. He glanced between the five living players gathered with glassy eyes. Lizzie and BigB followed him up, while Skizz disentangled himself from lower branches of the spruce tree. Scar remained up top with Impulse on the parapet, poking him with a finger.

"Me!" Impulse flashed a smile down at the zombies. "I'm your master! Now everyone go after Joel, right now!"

The command fell free from his lips without hesitation. The last yellow life *had* to die, a decree echoed by all. Especially after Joel had so unceremoniously rendered Impulse's snail invisible.

The burn of that last, *pitiful* death still lingered, despite that Wildcard having long faded. Impulse let it smoulder, cradling the flame and encouraging its growth to drive the zombies under his command.

The encouraging words of his allies only added kindling to the fire. After all, they had just been talking about how to kill Joel. Now, Impulse had provided an opportunity with five extra swords at their disposal.

Well, four now. Scar immediately fell to his death with Scott's laughter carrying over the ensuing lightning strike.

Impulse laughed and leapt off the wall. Wind rustled the trees and his hair from Pearl launching herself skywards, briefly catching his gaze and flashing him a bloodthirsty grin on her glide towards Joel's car.

Impulse returned her smile and tore his eyes away from the red cloak in the sky to sprint after his remaining allies— including a pig, which he assumed was Cleo.

BigB skidded to a stop. "Wait, I need a weapon."

"Right..." Impulse patted his pockets, scanning his inventory. "Bucket of lava?"

BigB shrugged. "Sure, that'll do."

"Perfect." Impulse grinned at his former ally.

The remains of Joel's car and Gem's patched-up barn lay directly ahead, both silent with no sign of the Family.

Pearl spiralled down from the sky, the tiny wings on both sides of her goggles fluttering as she came in for a running landing. She shook her head. "They're not here!" she called. "I'm going to fly around and look!"

Impulse gave her a thumbs up, and she was gone in another gust of wind. He drummed his fingers over the hilt of his sword as he waited for her to return with information. He kicked the dirt outside of Gem's barn while he paced, in the exact spot where him and Pearl had failed to catch Gem with a trap. Their most recent failure.

"This way!" Pearl's voice came from above, before she looped back towards Mount Bam. A plume of smoke billowed up to the abandoned bamboo forest. Explosions cracked with panicked and enraged shouts joining the chorus.

All music to his ears.

"Let's go!" Impulse yelled, leaving the dirt behind and stumbling on the bridge's uneven surface as he sprinted. He wouldn't fall. Not when he was so close, his eyes finally narrowing on his target at the centre of a chaotic whirlwind.

Etho sprinted away from exploding creepers, his voice lost over the yells of Grian and Bdubs charging down Mount Bam to join the fight while Tango circled for an opening. Ren and Martyn snuck in from between the Tuff Guy Towers. An easy opportunity to blindside Joel as long as his attention stayed elsewhere. Like on a creeper. Joel yelled as he teleported away, bringing his sword up against an enemy that wasn't there. He paused, shifting his stance until his eyes widened at the sight of Lizzie with a sword raised above her head, her eyes blank and merciless.

Impulse snatched his bow from his inventory, manoeuvring an arrow into place. His first arrow went wide, lodging itself in the loose dirt of the crater and barely missing Joel. But Impulse's second arrow flew true, drawing a pained yell from Joel and leaving a scarlet trail tracing down his arm like a river.

Impulse's heart pounded in his ears. Red flashed in the edges of his vision, yells dissolving into the roar while fletching brushed over his skin. The string of his bow, taut and sturdy with another arrow nocked and aimed for Joel's heart. All he had to do was shoot. Joel would come one step closer to death. All would be red.

He didn't even hear the hiss.

One second, Impulse was smiling, crimson haze in his mind and fire in his blood taking great joy in watching Joel stumble away from Lizzie. At the blood clinging to the tip of Lizzie's sword. The rough wooden surface of his bow in his hand and his own arrow lodged in Joel's shoulder. How his own wishes drove the blades of the zombies, demanding Joel's blood to be spilled over the explosion-marred ground.

And in the next— the force of the explosion at his back tore through Impulse's armour like paper. Agony seared through every nerve and muscle, burning and burning and *burning* until he collapsed onto his knees on the grass. Every instinct screamed at him to move— to fight— to run— when every breath of superheated air left his lungs aching with the acrid sting of gunpowder on his tongue.

He couldn't hear anything besides the lingering ring in his ears. No screams or explosions. Impulse forced his eyes open, blurry and itching while the world twisted and swam around him in swirls of green. He had to move. He'd die if he stayed here. His breath rattled, one hand grasping for a weapon, but finding nothing.

Impulse glanced down, vision snapping into focus to brilliant green and silvery moss through his hands, shimmering and translucent in the sunlight. To the ring of azalea bushes and the single pale oak sapling where it all began.

"No..." he whispered.

The hope that had first bloomed in this very spot that maybe— just maybe, this time would be different— withered in his chest. Pearl and Cleo and Scott— they had all believed in him and he failed. He failed— wasting Pearl's priceless gift of the totem.

And failed— dying to an invisible snail.

And failed again— he was too careless to avoid a creeper he should've seen.

He should've seen it.

He *should've*— He *shouldn't* have failed again—

It was supposed to be different this time.

A scream tore itself from his throat with no ears besides his own to hear it. Had he still been alive, Impulse knew the rage would've burned like the eternal fires of the Nether. Instead, the wind stole his voice, leaving him alone in a circle of azalea. He ended back where he started, hope replaced by the gaping void of his own failure wrapped like a vice around his heart.







Catch me if you can (I'm gone just like the wind, now)

Abyss

"We need to kill Joel!"

For once in the course of the series, those words in Scott's voice don't spark anger in Joel's chest. And really, after everything, they should.

Their rivalry has been the one constant across every season, starting when Joel burned his wall down in Third Life, and hasn't relented. Scott's killed him so *many times*; Joel has every right to be mad.

Instead, he teleports out of the crater he's run into and plunges his sword into Zombie Martyn, shouting, "Kill them all!" with a grin on his face. Maybe it's because he's still yellow, but it doesn't have the same crazed emotion as it would one life lower, like every season previous. This season feels much more like a fun game than a death match.

"Sorry guys, just gonna run away from here—" In a blink, he's moved yards away, and the frustrated shouts pause before following behind, redoubled. So we're *really doing this*? He smacks Etho away, grin widening further. *Sounds blummin' good to me.*

Lava burns Joel's legs and the weight of another person—*Scott, of course it's Scott*—slams into his shoulders. He stumbles and grits his teeth, but the adrenaline coursing through him kills the pain and focuses his energy. He throws Scott off of him, and he hits the ground with a *thunk* and exclamation of pain.

Through his peripherals, Joel spots Etho drop a shulker box, and switches places with him to dig through it. He grabs as many crossbows as he can carry before Etho punches him away. In Etho's eyes, he sees their history: the Relation, the fire, the worst heat of his life and then cold nothing, "*You saved me so I can kill you!*".

But as soon as it appears, it's gone, Etho's shout of "Get outta here!" snapping Joel back to the present.

He barely gets two steps before he's thrown into the air, scrambling for his bucket to land the clutch. Which he does, much to the others' dismay, the pool of water negating any damage. Joel continues to pop around, left and right; swap with Ren, with Tango, Cleo, Scott, Etho again, to exasperated groans of "No, no, I don't like that!", "Who keeps teleporting me?", and "Dangit, Joel!".

And it continues: swap, dash, swap, sarcastic comment, swap, dodge, swap. Everyone gets more and more frustrated, and Joel gets more and more exhilarated.

After a very close call with one of the many TNT-blown craters that nearly ended the fun early, Joel is yanked to the top of BAM Mountain—by Grian, evidently, since he's now where Joel was a moment ago, dashing around to avoid capture. Joel's reassured to have him as an ally, once again, as he catches his breath in the cherry blossoms. Limited Life was the first time he truly felt a part of something, and the trend has continued, thankfully.

In a flash, he's back down in the clearing, adrenaline pumping through his veins as he lets out a giddy laugh. He palms his creeper eggs before spawning them in a circle around him, trying to swap in Scott, but—

"Hey! Joel, we're *family*!" Gem shouts.

Whoops. "Sorry Gem!"

The creepers go in front of the Spanners' entrance next, in an attempt to box Scott in. It fails, the green leafy creatures exploding inches away from the target, but Joel isn't upset. Where he would normally feel anger and desperation, there is content and joyous warmth. This is *fun*; not in the way bloodlust is, but in the way a card game night with friends is. Sure, it's about blummin' time he killed Scott instead of vice-versa, and repeatedly not getting it is absolutely infuriating, but... he's less dramatic about it.

“It’s quite fun teleporting around, isn’t it Cleo, it’s quite fun just getting swapped,” he says as he switches with the person in question, who groans.

“Oh, I know.”

Ren catches him with cobwebs, and it’s almost Joel’s end of yellow, but once again he teleports away. Sticky string clinging to his clothes, he bounces all over the destroyed terrain, finding himself in the same huge crater he started this in.

Cleo comes up to the edge, looking down at where he’s pressed against the dirt wall. “Joel, you might just be the most annoying person in the world at—”

Joel swaps again, and his grin can’t possibly get any wider. “Sorry, what was that, Cleo?”

“I said you’re the most annoying person in the world!”

Yeah, he probably is. It’s more fun to be a menace, Cleo of all people knows that. They burned his roof down (ages ago, sure, but it did kill him) and just sent Zombie Skizz after his car. His car, of all things! Nobody touches his car.

Just to live up to his title, he fires a few “Is that annoying?” quips at them—paired with more swapping, of course—before he hears Grian shout, clocks the snails coming down from the sky, and backs off. Joel’s calm now, heading back to his base for TNT, dodging and teleporting away from people still trying to chase him. He’s relaxed, as he was the whole time—not screaming in panic nor delight, just laughing at the chaos he’s created.

Damn, he thinks, as the realization hits him. *I really could win this.*





a rivalry of ruin

Pluvi

Joel is *alive*.

The thought thrills him, honestly. Around him, names blur into a red, murderous haze, but despite their efforts, Joel still has two shiny lives in his pocket. Dodging their attacks is easy with his superpower; it's what comes next that stumps Joel.

As the fighting slows, an idea strikes him. "Grian, do you have any TNT?" Before the man can even respond, Joel runs off. This idea will be amazing, if he can pull it off. He stops on the bridge, checking his bag for supplies: sand, paper, gunpowder – anything he can use. Something knocks him into the water, but Joel doesn't mind. He teleports out, switching places with the first person he sees. After all, Joel has a plan, and he'll do anything to carry it through.

He grabs a handful of sugar cane and ducks into the bunker. Flinging open the chests, he rummages through them, tossing aside random bits. Where are the blocks he needs? After a bit, he's certain they must be in the car. He closes the chest, only to hear Grian shout a warning.

"Joel, watch out! Watch out, *watch out!*"

Scott, more than anything, wants Joel dead. He's sick of the teleportation and the taunting, and it's time he does something about it, Grian's warning

be damned. He drops in front of the bunker with a soggy squelch, delighted at the sight he finds: Joel with his back turned – the perfect target.

In a flurry of blades, Scott rushes forward, his sword cutting through flesh. He grins madly at the blood, taking another swing. But as his blade soars through the air, the bunker shifts. His sword lodges in wood instead of flesh. With a strong yank it comes free, but it's too late; Joel is gone.

Blood trickles across Joel's shoulder, but he pays it no mind; after all, he has a plan. His mind tumbles ahead of him as he runs to the car, so much that he doesn't even notice an arrow thud into thigh. Once there, he heads straight for the barrels and crafting tables.

Behind him, Gem calls out. "Joel, you okay?"

He digs through his bag, absentmindedly responding. "Uh, yeah Gem, I'm good. Just tryin' to craft somethin'." His bag is so cluttered, he can't find anything. Where is his blummin' sugar cane?

An axe swings wide in his periphery. Joel looks up, surprise in his voice. "Etho?"

Scott stumbles out of the bunker, a red haze blurring the edges of his vision. He has to kill; if not Joel, someone else. He glances at the people nearby, settling on a familiar red sweater. "Y'know what, Grian; I'll take care of you instead."

Grian runs as Scott approaches. His sword swings lazily as he lets the red haze guide him. He knows there is no escape for Grian; there is only death. Grian presses his back against the wall as Scott looms over him, sword raised for the kill. But when he brings it down, there is no lightning; there is only the crack of diamond against stone.

Scott blinks, the red haze falling. He checks his sword, finding the tip chipped. Heat builds in his chest at his carelessness, though it gives him an idea: what if the key to killing Joel is to be like him? What if Scott needs to be reckless? He looks at the car, considering the idea. He's not a fan of it, but recklessness just might work

"Etho, get out of here!" Joel shouts, blocking a blow with his sword. Etho's eyes widen as Joel slashes at him once, twice before running out the door with a muttered apology. Joel laughs in bafflement; Etho is his ally, last he checked. Of course, things might have changed; Joel's been a bit focused on his plan recently.

His plan. He rummages through his inventory, pulling out the sugar cane. He crafts the paper with ease, but as he goes for the next step, his mind blanks on how to craft TNT.

"Gem, how do you make TNT?" he calls, only for the question to jog his memory. He crafts some, shoving each new piece into his bag as quickly as he can.

Scott's heart pounds in his ears, red coating his vision as he stalks towards the car. It's faint

beneath his heartbeat, but he can hear someone in there. Hopefully, it's Joel. He rounds the corner, a sense of déjà vu washing over him. Once again, Joel's back is turned, this time bent over a crafting table. Scott smiles, his grip tightening on his sword, and he charges forward.

His first blow knocks Joel into the corner. Scott zeroes in with each strike, silent despite Joel's surprised shouts. He lets himself slash and stab without reason, paying no mind to the bites Joel's sword leaves in him. Scott doesn't care what it takes; he *will* kill Joel.

Blood covers his blade, covers Joel, but still Scott attacks. He slashes until Joel is on his knees begging. He cuts until the pleas stop, and then he continues. It is only when Scott is out of breath that he stops. As the red haze fades, he stares at the body below him in disbelief.

Smallishbeans was slain by Smajor1995

Joel dies in the car. It's as all things should be, really; he's poured hours into this blummin' car, and at last, he dies in it. His spirit lingers above his body for a moment, taking in the calm. Sure, Joel is frustrated that Scott killed him yet again, but this time, Joel isn't *dead*-dead. He'd been smart and stayed alive; he was the last green *and* the last yellow.

For once, Scott hasn't ended his chances. As he looks around, a thought comes to mind: he could win this. He's about to respawn when he looks down and gasps.

The red haze fades from Scott's mind as he looks down at Joel's body. At last, he's done it; he's killed Joel. He's fulfilled his pur-

Thwing.

Scott is dead before he knows what happened. His spirit floats above his body, hand against his throat in confusion. He sighs when he sees Etho atop the car, a crossbow in hand.

"At least it wasn't Joel," he mutters, looking back to his body once more. For a moment, Joel's body is there beside his own, and all Scott can do is smile. It cost him his life, but the playing field is leveled. All he can hope now is that his allies win.

"He's dead!" Joel respawns on the island, jumping with glee. "I don't care if I'm red; he's dead! Let's go Etho!"

Relief surges through Joel at the thought. With no Scott, the only one left to bring about his own downfall is Joel. Of course, he's not planning on that; in fact, he's not planning on anything with his previous one down the drain. He surveys the remaining server, a single thought flickering through his mind: *he could win this.*

Joel narrows his eyes and smiles, tightening the grip on his sword. The night sky twists above him as he issues his challenge to the world:

"Now, it's on."





Gem's Final Death

Intro

[ALL WILDCARDS ARE ACTIVE]

The protests from Gem, Joel, and Pearl were almost perfectly in sync as the rainbow letters flashed across their eyes, fading away into a cacophony of sounds spiraling into the chaos of the churning server.

“What do you mean they’re all active?!” Pearl protested from next to Gem.

She couldn’t hear Joel, but she could hear him somewhere behind her, “What? Do we all have the same powers? – No, it’s different.”

Gem was shocked; she could only exclaim, “Oh my gosh!” as everything around her changed.

All around them, the world started behaving differently. Two bright bolts of lightning struck the ground, illuminating the dark evening and instantly incinerating the fern on the ground.

Gem jumped into the air in fright, only to be temporarily held in place as time rapidly slowed around her before it started to rapidly creep forward again, dropping her back to the fern-covered ground.

She jumped up into the air again, greatly enjoying how the all-too-slow flowing of time held her up in the air ever so slightly longer than it should have been able to.

Before she could fully land on the ground again, Joel bounced around above her and observed something: “There are things coming in.”

Gem was confused and a bit shocked, no powers had become apparent to her and yet so much kept happening.

Suddenly, the melodic chiming of two trivia bots floated down from far above. The sudden descending music was ever so slightly off-beat from each other.

She watched as one of them landed in front of Pearl and she wandered off to go look at it and attempt to answer her question. Spinning about Gem saw Jimmy had crossed over the bridge and had brought a large group with him.

As soon as she looked away, she could hear him calling her name along with Scott for some reason.

Moments later, Gem felt the familiar sting of being on fire as someone placed a lava bucket directly where she was standing. She tried to put herself out with water but was instantly hit with swords.

Running away, she summoned some creepers to hopefully slow her attackers down and ran away from them further into the island she had called home for so long.

Once she was far enough away from the attackers she called out to Pearl, who had also apparently scattered in the escape, "What just happened?"

Pearl danced around the field, rushing over to the trivia bot that jumped over the crowd, pressing further into the base to reach her. Gem had no idea if she had managed to complete it yet. "I don't know! It wasn't me!"

Joel was also yelling, Gem could not tell exactly where he was coming from, but he was definitely getting closer to them, "We're failing our things!- We're failing our things!"

Jim rushed over to her bot, sat nestled over a small pile of crushed dandelions. She risked clicking it open for a brief moment to try to answer her question. 'Who died first this season? A. Scar, B. Lizzie, C. Jimmy, D. Skizz, E. Pearl'. She quickly picked 'C' as something started hitting her from behind.

"Oh, where's my bot!" Pearl looked away from the bot for a brief moment to call a question over to Gem, "What flower did Gem give Etho this season?"

Gem cried out in shock as she spun about and saw Martyn attacking her, "Ah!"

“Gem, what did you give to Etho?” Pearl continued to echo her question from earlier, facing away from Gem while Martyn attacked her. Gem felt a bit bad she didn’t answer, but running for her life was far more important than answering a question; she could answer it after she made it out of this, after all.

Gem rushed over to where Pearl was, trying to get out of Martyn’s attack range.

She could hear him yelling behind her, “Master’s orders.”

Turning back on him, Gem chased Martyn to the riverbank, echoing his statement, “Master’s orders?”

When he got to the water he started swimming away and Gem retreated back into the walls of her base as a trident shot at her from the water.

Gem ran. She ran from Scar, even as he offered help. She ran away from everyone. She ran to the only safe place she had known on this server, the car.

She had finally made it away. Away from the spontaneous cacophony of the spiraling server. She was finally safe on a pillar above the poppy-covered underside of the car.

She should be safe.

Yet she was still taking damage. She shouldn’t be taking damage.

Why was she taking damage?

[GeminiTay was slain by Vex]







the winner takes it all

Imeda

“Joel, you could win this.”

It’s a little funny to think about the fact that Joel was told the same thing twice today by two different people on two completely separate occasions. It begs the question of whether he believes in fate or not; was it fate that dragged him all the way to the top of that cherry tree, watching as he kicked and fought for victory every step of the way or was it his own bloodstained hands that wrapped themselves around victory and refused to let go?

He supposes it doesn’t matter anymore. He won. That’s all that matters now.

He’s been wanting it for so long now. Winning was supposed to be the be-all and end-all to everything he’s ever wanted. What is there left to do now?

Joel scuffs his foot against the ground, digging up specks of dirt as he trudges through the grass. Winning feels good. He won’t lie about that. He can still feel adrenaline in his blood, the hungry desire for *more* burning under his skin. He’d tried so hard. He did everything differently this time. He was careful and logical whether that was with making allies or just refusing to rush into fights that he knew he couldn’t win. He did absolutely everything he possibly could to *finally* win.

Maybe it was obvious. Maybe that’s why Gem had pulled him aside at their base, grinning as she’d said *“Joel, you could win this”* and it had sounded like she really believed it. Maybe everybody else had seen it too.

The thing is, Joel *doesn’t* believe in fate. It wasn’t fate that brought about Joel’s victory. He did that himself. He spent this whole season clawing victory from the jaws of everyone who stood in his way. He did it himself. That’s why Grian stood on top of that deep slate tower with him, his hands squarely on both of Joel’s shoulders as he’d said *“Joel, you know you could win this, right?”*

Twice, he'd been told. If both Gem and Grian could see it, it's no wonder he's ended up here, wandering the desolate fields of a world where the only person left is himself. That's what he gets from winning—well, that and the glory. The glory is what Joel really cares about. He likes the rush of victory flowing through his veins. He likes to cut down everyone in front of him, blood in his mouth and on his hands because how else could he prove that he *deserves* this?

Still, it's a little strange to be alone now.

He continues wandering, scraping his shoes against the ground and stealing glances at the world around him. Grian's deepslate tower is still standing, the dark walls having seen so much death within them that it's almost ironic that Grian had told him he could win on top of that very death trap. He can see the remnants of the Tuff Guys' towers, blown to pieces. He has to maneuver around pieces of shrapnel wedged into the ground to get back to his base.

The whole place is *destroyed*. The ground is littered with gaping holes that Joel has to dodge to get around. Everything that once was, no longer is.

Joel can't help the sigh that escapes his mouth. It was beautiful while it lasted.

He digs through his pockets, his fingers brushing over something sleek and cool. He'd almost forgotten that he had ender pearls with him—which is honestly strange considering how often he'd used them during that final battle. He'd thrown ender pearl after ender pearl, no regard for the extra damage that he'd taken. The only thing on his mind had been *winning*.

Whatever it takes. He'd been willing to do whatever it took to win. He'd seen Grian on top of that cherry tree and he'd screamed that he was sorry even as he hadn't hesitated to swing his sword at Grian's chest. Above all else, Joel likes to win. He'll do anything—he'll fight and he'll maim and he'll *kill* if it will get him closer to getting what he wants. After all, he's been waiting for this for so *long*.

Finally, he can't help but think. It's finally happened. He's gotten so close and had it ripped out from under him time and time again, but this time—this time, he *won*.

He did everything differently this time around. He kept his head clear and his emotions in check. He'd listened when Gem had told him to back down, staying back from fights that he couldn't take. That's what got him all the other times. He always used to rush into fights that he *knew* he couldn't win just because he liked the thrill of running into a fight where the world was against him just to see how many he could take down. Not this time. This time, it was about *family*. This time, it was about letting someone else share the weight on his shoulders and recognizing that he didn't need to carry it alone.

He tosses an ender pearl just for fun, wincing when he hits the ground a few blocks away. He's pretty sure human bodies aren't made to teleport—it's why it *hurts* so much—but he still likes the thrill of zooming through the air and feeling the cold bite of the wind against his cheeks. He'd used so many in his final battle. He spins one around in his hands, dark blue swirling around the sphere; it feels like victory.

He throws another one, ignoring the way nausea clouds his vision. Human bodies can really only take teleportation in small doses; the more he throws them, the more it feels like he's tearing through the fabric of the universe, his physical body being pulled in every possible direction.

What is there left to do anyway? He won. He did it. This is the logical end. There isn't much else he can do now.

Joel takes a deep breath as he pulls another ender pearl out of his pocket. He'd wondered earlier if it was fate that brought him here or if he'd made it here entirely of his own volition, ready to fight to get what he wanted because for *once*, he deserved to get it.

He doesn't think it matters. Whether fate is real or not, he won. This is the end of everything. He is all that's left; there's nobody left to remember his victory.

Joel feels dirt crunch under his shoes, blades of grass bending over to let him make his way through the world. The world will remember. Even after he's gone, the world will remember that he was here—that he finally won after so many attempts. That's enough. That has to be enough.

“Victory!” Joel shouts, throwing his last ender pearl. This is everything that he’s wanted. He did it. He won. He doesn’t need anything else. There’s a sharp sting of pain as his body twists through time and space, but it quiets down to just a dull ringing in the back of his head.

It feels so good to win.

Joel hits the ground too hard.





lol!!!

stick
to pvp

that
was
snd to
watch

LOL

you suck
at traps
bestie

TRAFFIC

ZINE